

July 5, 2019

Along the Way: Independence Day

My family did not celebrate July 4th, not because we were unpatriotic but more because it happened in the middle of the growing season, and we were too busy working the farm—or so it seemed to my child's mind.

I imagine it also had something to do with being Mennonite, where we were frequently reminded that our true allegiance was to God, not country. These days, we hear a lot about patriotism and nationalism. It is important to make a distinction between them. Patriotism can be defined simply as love of country. It's the kind of love that makes you want to kiss the ground after a long trip. It's the feeling of gratitude for our freedom of democracy.

Nationalism, on the hand, takes that love of country and expands it to mean love of country at the expense of other countries. It's when we believe that we are better than others. It can mean treasuring the American identity at the expense of others.

In the Gospel of Luke, there is a story about Jesus that when he is within sight of Jerusalem, he wept and said, "If only you had known the path to peace today!" He weeps out of love for this city, a symbol of his country, because he knew they were getting it wrong. They had strayed from the path of peace.

We love our country. We love our freedom. It is something to treasure and celebrate. And yet, we hold it in tension with the reality that our country gets some things wrong. True patriotism lies in the ability to judge one's nation in its successes and shortcomings.

For Christians, whose true alliance is to God, we measure our nation by the love shown to our neighbors. Let's keep working to make our country a place of freedom for all.

—Paula Northwood