

# Voices: On bended knees and love of country

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The furor over athletes kneeling during the national anthem has reached a fever pitch in the last few days, fueled in part no doubt by the regular lobbing of Molotov cocktails from the presidential Twitter account.

The shared logic of the outraged seems to be that kneeling during the national anthem is an intentional disrespect of the symbols of America and, by extension, the people who fought for the rights and privileges of Americans which her common symbols represent.

In other words, to put it somewhat reductively, those who love America would not, could not, kneel.

At the root of this patriotic outcry is an illogical and problematic notion of love. Love of country, so it says, is demonstrated above all by reverence and submission to the symbols of the country, to flag and anthem.

Not only does it not follow that love must exclude expressions of criticism and pain, but that notion directly goes against the principle of loving critique which the Bible repeatedly emphasizes in both testaments. We could pick numerous examples from Deuteronomy or the Prophets, but the simplest expression is in Proverbs 3:11-12: "My child, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights."

The same idea appears in Paul's letters and in a form clearly dependent on Proverbs in Revelation's letter of rebuke to Laodicea: "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent" (Revelation 3:19).

Now, obviously, we are not in the place of God, but the general principle still stands that genuine love is very often expressed through disagreement and rebuke. The broader application of the idea is indirectly acknowledged in the text of Proverbs itself when it uses the analogy of a father and son. Parents know that loving parenting often requires rebuke.

## **On bended knees**

That certainly rings true in my life as a parent. My son is perhaps most pleased when I am at my most permissive, but I know that he is often best served and best shaped by the gentle, loving rebuke of his parents. Why, when this principle is so evident in our own lives and in our relationships to God, do so many fail to grasp that a bended knee is no sign of a crooked heart?

I am particularly troubled by the fact that many of those who have heaped the greatest amount of bile and vitriol upon Colin Kaepernick and those following his example are my brothers and sisters in Christ. Kaepernick and some of his fellow players have been quite clear that their activism on the field is related explicitly to their faith in Jesus Christ. This alone should give the enraged mobs pause.

But instead of asking why their brother feels compelled by his faith to act in this manner, they have invented their own reasons for his behavior. He is unamerican, a provocateur, trying to build a brand on his failed career (never mind that his activism has almost certainly imperiled it), racist against whites, and above all “ungrateful.”

I cannot claim to know what motivates so many Christians to behave in this way, but I have an idea.

# Nationalism and racism

I believe we are witnessing the convergence of two insidious sins which have taken root in the church.

First, the sin of nationalism robs the church of its ability to offer a loving rebuke of our government, and, thus impotent, Christianity becomes a feckless state religion.

Today, I happen to be reading over Amos in preparation for teaching, and I am struck by the parallels between the unwelcome portents of doom by prophets and our rejection of prophetic voices of critique against our society. Put another way, what has been said of Kaepernick that could not have been said in response to one of the prophets?

Even Amos, who gave up his herds and traveled to the northern kingdom far from kin and friends, was accused by Amaziah of prophesying in Israel as a way to put food on the table. As Jesus pointed out, prophets are rarely loved in their hometowns either.

Second, the sin of racism has infected the hearts of our people to a degree many do not wish to acknowledge.

Black entertainers are told to keep our entertainment at the forefront. Using their platform to advance their own issues is “ungrateful.” The underlying reasoning seems to be that without us and our viewership they’d still be in poverty, never mind that they’ve been elevated by their own talents and abilities.

The white occupation of black success, particularly in sports, is, I believe, fundamentally rooted in racism. Many of those who heap scorn upon Kaepernick do so in racially charged ways. They hate black success yet still desire to internalize the success of black athletes through their fandom.

The key for them, I think, is forgetting athletes' blackness, subsidizing their black identity beneath the collective identity of the team and its fans. Being reminded of the reality of our society by successful black people breaks the fandom trance and reminds them of their underlying resentment.

## **'A stark and ugly reality'**

The spell thus broken, we are confronted by a stark and ugly reality. Our country, which we love and in which we deservedly invest some pride, is plagued by injustices and inequalities.

Perhaps we tuned into the game to escape the cares of the day or the stress of work, only to have the faults of our society pushed in our face. We are right to be unsettled by this, but it is madness to hate the doctor for telling you of your cancer.

Instead of lashing out at those disturbing voices for the discomfort they cause, perhaps we need to think deeply about what in their consciences compels them to speak out in this way. I think if we open ourselves to troubling, prophetic voices, we will recognize the injustices unfolding before our eyes.

The blood of our black brothers and sisters cries out from the ground. It testifies against us.

Will we now punish the voices who echo its cry or will we rebuke what we love?

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