

# Fun with Flags (But who do you say that I am?)

Mark 8:27-38

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 13, 2015

Opening Video: Dr. Sheldon Cooper Presents: "Fun with Flags"  
from *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 5, Episode 14  
Available Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XI12Sp1KiEk>

Allow me to switch gears for just a moment before returning to our regularly scheduled "Fun with Flags."

One of my current favorite online comic strips is *Coffee with Jesus*, a satirical glimpse into imagined coffee shop conversations with Jesus from Radio Free Babylon, a consortium of artists and other creative types. Recently, I ran across the following, which I wanted to share with you<sup>1</sup>:



I share this because this *Fun with Flags* worship theme was first conceived back at the end of June, when the public debates over the Supreme Court's ruling on same-sex marriage as well as the display of the Confederate Flag in the wake of the mass shooting at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, SC were reaching their peaks. Which is when I ran across this meme on Facebook:



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/RadioFreeBabylon/photos/a.680531388641074.1073741826.167938346567050/780382498655962/>

It was funny, because it was true. Probably a third to a half of my friends had changed their profile images to some version of one or the other of these flags, and the posts that kept popping up from them revealed that they were intent on fighting this out. So this meme was a breath of fresh air in the midst of the arguments. Now, I don't mean to trivialize these important debates. But in the moment of levity this meme brought, it occurred to me what a welcome relief that little bit of humor was in what was otherwise an increasingly uncomfortable, polarized, and divisive forum. Though I had and have strong and deeply held opinions on both of these questions, I also have old, respected, and good friends who are on both sides of these debates. I love and respect them all, and want to stay in relationship with each one. And I can see good on all sides of most debates, these included. But I also find myself wanting to disengage with the debates. I find myself wishing for my friends to just quit arguing. Which is a problematic realization for someone who believes that it is not only possible, but of vital importance for communities and families and groups to be able to discuss and debate controversial issues surrounding our values and identities.

And that is where the *Fun with Flags* idea came in. Long before the rainbow and stars and bars memes came to Facebook, Jeff and I had decided that we would explore symbols as a worship focus during this programming year, using the symbols theme to give shape and direction to our planning for all three of our worship gatherings, including Children's Worship. And what better symbol to kick off this theme than flags? You could say that flags are a symbol of symbols. They represent our identities, our loyalties, and our deeply held values. But as my Facebook feed demonstrated, flags can also be polarizing – which is definitely not one of my objectives, today or any day.

So I must confess to you that the remainder of this homily is not fun. But it is important. For as I thought about that moment when that Facebook meme first made me giggle, even in the midst of public debates about which I hold strong opinions and in which I have friends all across the spectrum of positions, I wondered – what if we could have a little fun with flags, as the good Dr. Sheldon Cooper suggested? What if we could name the serious debates such public symbols have come to represent, while holding them lightly enough to share a littler laughter around them?

As I was percolating and reflecting on these ideas, the time came for me to choose a topic and title for today's worship focus. As I almost do, I turned to the lectionary scriptures assigned for this Sunday, and I was immediately drawn to the gospel text. "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples. They respond: "Some people say this, other people say that, and still other people say something else."

A public debate. People on different sides of an important question. All of whom are wrong.

"But who do you say that I am?" Jesus presses them. Peter steps up and utters the truth – "You are the Messiah." And then, in one of the most perplexing turns in the gospels, Jesus warns his disciples to keep it quiet. To sit on the truth. To not go around telling people about it.

Now I have always wondered about this so-called "Messianic Secret" that biblical scholars have identified and discussed at length in the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus repeatedly tells his followers not to reveal who he really is. It has never really made any sense to me. But thinking about it in the context of a public debate changes things a bit for me.

As the scripture goes on, we see that even though Peter glimpsed the truth of Jesus' identity, he was still at a loss as to what that really meant in its fullness, even to the point that Jesus rebukes Peter when he protests Jesus' explanation of his coming suffering. And then Jesus addresses the crowd, telling them that if they intend to follow him, they have to deny themselves and let him lead. Hmmmm.

I think one of the greatest dangers in our public debates is the confusion of our own opinions and ideas and values and beliefs with God's. And I think at least some of that can be attributed to a religious "rally around the flag" effect. In short, we imagine ourselves to be champions of God's truth, and we wrap Jesus in the flags of our own identity.

To some extent, this is unavoidable. If we are truly trying to love God and follow Jesus as best we know how, then our values and beliefs will naturally reflect our best understandings of who Jesus is and what God expects of us. But as the apostle Paul reminds us in Corinthians, we only see in a mirror dimly, and we know only in part.<sup>2</sup> Even when Peter was able to name the truth of Jesus' identity, he still only understood a fraction of what that meant. And that wasn't enough, and so Jesus told him and the other disciples to be quiet about it, and to get in line behind him.

I could imagine an additional scene following Peter's proclamation, with the disciples preparing to raise a "Jesus is the Messiah" banner, when Jesus tells them to just put the flag away and just follow him. Probably took the wind right out of their proverbial sails.

Many of you know and remember well our former interim pastor, Fred Bernhard. One of the things that will always stick with me from his time among us was one of the things he told the staff at our first meeting together. While we were sharing a laugh, probably at his expense, he said something like, "You know, I don't take myself seriously, but I take God very seriously." It was like the moment of levity offered to me by that Facebook meme – a healthy reminder of proper perspective.

Because to some extent, we are all self-centered. And we all carry our flags – symbols of what we value, of what we think is important, of where our allegiances lie. And they are sometimes very different from one another, so much so that we may seem like strangers to each other. But what we have in common, and what binds us together, is our place in the long line of human beings who have done our best to follow after Jesus – sometimes getting it right, but most often getting it only partly right, and sometimes getting it terribly wrong. Like any collective of human beings, we have and will have our debates, and we do not nor will not always agree. But if we can remember who we are – imperfect human beings trying our best to follow Jesus – we need not let our debates tear us apart. And if we can hold our selves lightly enough – if we can deny that part of our selves that believes we have the truth all figured out – I think we might even be able to have a little fun with our flags. And it just might be that the fun we have revives our spirits, gives us the energy to carry on, and reminds us that we are all part of Christ's family – sisters and brothers all gathered beneath the banner of God's love, following as best we can in the fellowship and the way of the one who embodied that love. That may be the one and only flag around which we can all rally.

May it be so.

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<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:12

## **Benediction**

*There is a love that binds the world together.  
A love that seeks the last, the lost, the least.  
One day that love will bring us all together  
in Christ from south and north, from west and east.*

In the meantime, may our fellowship offer a foretaste of the heavenly banquet,  
and may no flag – or anything else in all creation –  
come between us and our love for God or for one another.  
Amen