

America's ownership of God

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August 4, 2016

A few years ago, our church installed a new water cooler—not the kind with the clear jug on top but the kind that we used back in grade school. It's a rectangular prism that rises straight from the floor. When you press the circular silver button, water flows in a gentle arc so that you can lap the cooled water up into your mouth. (I had always called that a water fountain, but David, who helped us install it, taught me that a fountain is a landscape feature in your front yard.) We hadn't had a working water cooler at St. John's in a long time, and it was a welcomed addition.

When it was time to purchase the water cooler, David told me, "They come in any color you want...as long as that color is gray." The pause he offered in the middle of that sentence was long enough for my mind to picture a shockingly yellow or delightfully crimson water cooler standing proudly by the restrooms of our church building. When he completed his sentence, it took me a minute to come back to reality and realize that of course all water coolers look the same. It didn't matter what choice I wanted to make. That choice was already made for me.

I rarely preach on the psalm and hardly ever give it much attention, but the opening verse of one of the psalms for Sunday ([Psalm 33:12–22](#)) stuck out to me on Monday, and I'm still wrestling with it: "Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord! Happy the people he has chosen to be his own!" On the surface, it seems so simple and clear. But, like my friend's water cooler comment, I make it half way through the verse before I realize what it's really about. "Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord" tempts me to think that this is about a nation choosing the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to be its god, but, when I discover that "the people he has chosen to be his own" are the happy ones, I am reminded that we don't get to own God; God owns us.

In political seasons like this one, there is always talk about our nation's religious identity. "We used to be a nation that put God first—a Christian nation—but now we're falling apart because we've lost our moral compass." The religion of the presidential candidates enters the equation. "Is she really Methodist? Is he just pretending to be Presbyterian?" Religious voices cast the election as if our nation's religious identity is a choice we make in the ballot box. "Which candidate would Jesus support?" But all of that suggests that we get to choose—as individuals, as candidates, as voters, or even as the entire electorate. It says so in the Bible: "Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord."

That approach to choosing God is dangerously close to exercising ownership over God. As Kee Sloan described in his book *Jabbok*, when the Baptist preacher concluded his table blessing with "Lord, we thank you for being our Lord," the main character and his friend joked between themselves that the Reverend had officially claimed ownership over the Almighty. Sure, I recognize that each of us makes decisions that align our hearts and minds and families with God. Think of Joshua's declaration in Joshua 24: "Choose this day whom you will serve." But as that statement by Joshua underscores, our choice isn't of which god will belong to us but to whether we will belong to God.

We don't choose God. God chooses us. Our choice isn't whether we will make God (or God's proxy) the leader of this nation. Our choice is whether we will live our lives in service, in deference, in subjection to God. What does it mean to be a nation that belongs to God? It's not about electing the candidate who talks the most about

God and Jesus and the Bible. It's not about voting for the candidate whose church attendance record is the most impressive. Being a nation that belongs to God is about bending our collective will to reflect the commandments of God. It's about giving up our choices to do what we might want to do with our resources, our might, and our voice and subjecting ourselves to the will of God. If you want to make that into a political choice, don't vote for the person who seems to be the most faithful. Vote for the platform that envisions a nation and a world that looks most like the kingdom of God. If you need help figuring that out, open your Bible and read any of the Gospel accounts from start to finish.

Originally posted at [A Long Way from Home](#)