

"The Way of Jesus: The Love of Neighbor"

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, June 13, 2021

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Traditional Word

34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

—Matthew 25:34-36

Contemporary Word

But what does it mean to be on God's side? I believe it starts with focusing on the common good - not just in politics, but in all the decisions we make in our personal, family, vocational, financial, communal, and, public lives. That old but always new ethic simply says we must care for more than just ourselves or our own group. We must care for our neighbor as well, and for the health of the life we share with one another. It echoes a very basic tenet of Christianity and other faiths - love your neighbor as yourself - still the most transformational ethic in history. --Jim Wallis

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"The Way of Jesus: The Love of Neighbor"

Today marks the third week of our new sermon series on The Way of Jesus—The Other Side of the Story. I thought it would be helpful for us during this sabbatical season to reflect on this thing called Christianity and how it came to be practiced in its modern forms. And I want us to reflect on our own place within the contemporary practice of Christianity. And I want each of you to consider what it means for you to claim the title Christian for yourself if you do, or Follower of Jesus, if you prefer that. Or...even if you don't know precisely what you are regarding the Jesus of history or the Christ Event, I hope to give you some food for thought about church. You might just like the music and have not thought that much about what it might mean to be a Christian in Wichita, Kansas, in 2021 after 15 months of social isolation and lockdown. What it means to say aloud: "I am a Follower of Jesus" or "I am a Christian." Both phrases identify you as something unique and special and connect you to the church of history and the church-as-yet-to-be.

The past two sermons have dealt with the struggles that people went through as they were introduced to this new way to be in the world. This new "Way of Jesus." A belief system that made a number of consequential claims. 1: Rome isn't the answer; God is the answer. 2: Living in community is essential and better than living out of community. 3: Love God and Love Neighbor—on those two commands hang everything else. But what about heaven? What about sin? What about my soul? What about the requirements of creeds and all of the rules? Yes. Well. All of that is interpretation. Those are doctrines and teachings of the church, and not all of us believe they are required for practicing the faith. This conversation has been going on ever since the women found the tomb empty on Easter morning. And it will continue long after all of us are gone, and the scriptures are re-interpreted for a new age. This is how our faith works. It sits on a foundation of Love of God and Love of Neighbor, and it is re-invented, re-interpreted, re-discovered, re-formed, re-newed in each age. Each generation builds on the faith of the previous.

The first few hundred years of the Christian story speak of incredible growth in the church. People convert to a new religion because of an interest in a new culture. And Rome was always conquering new cultures to assimilate and take what worked and discard what didn't. The Romans were nothing if not pragmatic.

Christianity was efficacious. It worked. It's that simple. And some of the early adopters of the faith, say, the Apostle Paul, used the resources of their secular lives to introduce others in their sphere to the new "way of Jesus." There were the miracles and signs and symbols that reinforced to skeptical people that maybe there was something to this Way of Jesus. Outward evidence that it worked.

From 165 to 180, a terrible plague ravaged Rome. Based on the existing scholarship, it was probably either smallpox or measles, and it was relentless. However, members of the new faith communities that had sprung up around the various documents (Matthew, Mark, Luke, etc.) proved their devotion to the faith by acts of incredible bravery and love. Bishop Cyprian of Carthage summed up the effect of both the plague and the new Christ Followers like this: "The plague was a winnowing process in which God's justice was shown by whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinfolk as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted." And when asked as to why they behaved so ethically, we only need to understand that they answered the call of the Greatest Commandment. The earliest documents indicate that it was love of God and neighbor that propelled people to act on their sense of duty. The early faithful were taking to heart Matthew's words from chapter 25:34-36: "Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and

you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Not only were the early Christ-followers beneficial to their community in medical emergencies, they were all useful during other catastrophes, even opening their homes to serve not only as house churches but as hospices, field offices, and other functions of the burgeoning faith. Once Christianity became legal in the empire, roughly around 313 with the Edict of Milan, hospitality became even more of an institutional function of the community.

Basil of Caesarea, brother to Gregory of Nyssa, received his moniker of Basil the Great because he averted disaster during a famine in 368—he created a sort of food bank, and all of the families of the church's members participated. Basil was an East Roman bishop of Caesarea Mazaca in Cappadocia, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). He was an influential theologian who supported the Nicene Creed and opposed certain heresies of the early Christian church, fighting against both Arianism (a belief that basically negates the trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—Arians believed the three were NOT made of the same stuff) and he, Basil, also fought the followers of Apollinaris of Laodicea who believed—basically—that Jesus was a God in his own right and did not require any connection to Jehovah. These may seem like minor points of contention now, but in the early church, your position regarding the trinity was, in reality, a matter of life or death. Believe the wrong thing, and you could face your execution. Basil's ability to balance his theological convictions with his political connections made Basil a powerful advocate for the Nicene position, which is the one we ended up with where Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are co-equal partners in the Godhead.

Basil also built one of the first Christian hospitals and a hospice in his diocese. He eventually wrote a rule for monastic order where he structured hospitality as a cardinal virtue of the religious life. An ancient traveler that we know by the name of Rufinus had this to say about hospitality in the ancient world: "Then we came to Nitria, the best-known of all of the monasteries of Egypt, about forty miles from Alexandria. As we drew near to that place and they realized that foreign brethren were arriving, they poured out of their cells like a swarm of bees and ran to meet us with delight and alacrity, many of them carrying containers of water and of bread...When they had welcomed us, first of all, they led us with psalms into the church and washed our feet and one-by-one they dried them with the linen cloth they were girded with, as if to wash away the fatigue of the journey...What can I say that would do justice to their humanity, their courtesy. And their love? Nowhere have I seen love flourish so greatly, nowhere with such quick compassion, such eager hospitality." Isn't that a lovely vision of the early church? Such extravagant welcome! Such joy to be in the company of other believers! So much love.

Based on how the modern conservative movement has co-opted the teachings of Jesus for political purposes, you wouldn't have thought that some of the Church fathers and mothers were communists and socialists, would you? Early interpretations of Jesus' commandment to sell all you own and give it to the poor caused many early Christian communities to look very communal in nature. And they were. Part of Paul's pitch to people to join the new faith was along the lines of "Come, Follow Jesus, and all of your needs will be met. Join our new faith community of Christ-following Jews, and you will never want for anything again. We understand this thinking from the modern examples of the Hare Krishna groupings and how they live in community. Or a less "hippie" example would be more like the kibbutzes of Israel. Communal living. Shared living. It's not unlike how we live when we go to Chacreseca. The Peace House is basically a large dormitory with a central gathering space. The community provides our meals in a common kitchen just across the courtyard from the Peace House. During our time in Chac, we live and work together as one cohesive unit. There's much more a sense of neighbor in Nicaragua than here because the plight of your neighbor in Chacreseca is your predicament as well. It is a community where loving your neighbor is intertwined into the fabric of their lives together. When you are poor-- when your country is poor—when it is difficult to make it through the day, let alone the week, community becomes much more central to your life—you can't risk being a loner because you may very well separate yourself out of the community for good.

We tend to take money for granted here in our nation of abundance (except when you don't have any money, and then it suddenly becomes a huge priority). Theologians and thinkers and church mothers and fathers from our past have often questioned the role of money in our lives. One of the most famous preachers in the church's history, John Chrysostom, often preached against the accumulation of wealth—which is ironic since his name translates as "golden mouth"—the words that poured forth from his lips were determined to be that valuable. He said this: "...it is not for lack of miracles that the church is stagnant; it is because we have forsaken the angelic life of Pentecost, and fallen back on private property." (69). His sermons were often filled with calls for the redistribution of wealth—imagine a church father who would preach such nonsense? Right? Except he was one of the most beloved preachers we've ever had. And it was that "golden mouth" of his that ended his reign as the bishop of Constantinople. He made the political mistake of calling the empress's excesses into question and found himself canceled. In the fourth century, being canceled meant that the church would post you far away in some remote diocese where you couldn't get into any more trouble, just like what the modern Methodists do. Chrysostom died en route to his exile posting.

The Book of Acts repeats Jesus's call to liquidate our wealth and give it to the poor. This type of charity grew in popularity in these early communities, and many people flocked to sell everything they owned and join one. Generous interpretations

of Jesus' words led them to believe, deep in their souls, that they were doing "God's work." And since they benefitted from the community's success, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy that loving your neighbor was like loving yourself because as your neighbors' standard of living improved, so did yours. Diana Butler Bass adds that: "Radical charity, such as selling all of one's goods for the poor was twinned with hospitality as part of the new Christian community's basic framework of morality and a mark of discipleship." "Throughout the first five centuries of Christianity, people of the way struggled with their relationship to property and money—and in greater part concluded that wealth was, at the very least, somewhat unseemly." You can see how the early church struggled to balance the needs of the many in the community and the needs of the individual. To that end, wealth accumulation was seen as beneficial to the whole and not necessarily to the individual. It seems we have inherited a gospel that doesn't hold capitalism in high regard. Or at least a capitalism that excludes some members of society from full participation. A practice of modern Christianity might include a focus on the poor and an understanding that God is always on the side of our poor neighbor.

Jim Wallis, of that group of good-trouble makers, the Sojourners, asks this: "But what does it mean to be on God's side? I believe it starts with focusing on the common good - not just in politics, but in all the decisions we make in our personal, family, vocational, financial, communal, and, public lives. That old but always new ethic simply says we must care for more than just ourselves or our own group. We must care for our neighbor as well, and for the health of the life we share with one another. It echoes a very basic tenet of Christianity and other faiths - love your neighbor as yourself - still the most transformational ethic in history." Christianity is efficacious. It works. You all have told me of experiences that you have had where you are confident God is working in your lives. Whether it is the Christ, the Holy One, or that ineffable Spirit, something about our faith gives us hope and energy for the future.

The first four hundred years of the Christian story were exciting, dramatic, and filled with pathos and adventure. They also laid the groundwork for where the church was headed: centralized institutions. We're going to explore what this means to us today in the coming weeks—next week, we focus on church architecture a little bit. This community sends messages out into the world simply by our existence. Not merely our electronic sign, even though we send messages that way, but the design of our physical structure, the architecture of this building "speaks" to people. We routinely get messages from strangers who see our church and reflect on life in profound ways sometimes. People who have no connection to this community whatsoever have written to thank us for our presence—they find our existence in the world a source of solace and comfort--to know that we are here and doing good work.

We're going to explore just what cathedrals and churches and tabernacles and temples and other religious structures communicate to the world. You have some homework this week. As you drive around Wichita or whatever city you might find yourself in, I want you to pay attention to the religious structures. What is the building's architecture "telling" us? What message is being conveyed by the stone, the marble, the steeple, or the lack of one? Is there an ostentatious golden cross? Or, more interesting to me, why does the mosque have what it has on top of the dome? What does that mean? Do you see signs and symbols from other traditions? How do you feel when you observe the Star of David in public? Or a symbol from Daoism? Or a Buddhist prayer flag? These physical symbols indicate that humans have a long and diverse tradition of attempting to understand our place in the cosmos. And as you look at these buildings and signs and symbols, ask yourself this: Why do I believe what I believe? Isn't much of what I believe simply passed on to me culturally? What if I had been born in another country where Christianity is not practiced? Would I still have become a Christian once I was exposed to the faith?

One more thing to think about as you look at other people's faithful architecture: "Human beings just like you and me revere and love their buildings and symbols JUST as much as we love and revere ours." Humans have forever looked about them and thought, "What is my place in this world?". "What am I here to accomplish?" "What gives my life meaning?"

Hopefully, our signs and symbols and architecture tell the world that this community of friends will welcome you—will care for you—if you are hungry, we will help you find food. If you are thirsty, we will offer you something to drink. We will clothe you and assist you with household needs. And we do this because we know that the best way to love God is to love our neighbor. That is how we will transform this church into a better reflection of God's love. We will do this together because that is what God calls us to do. Together. Amen. RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.

<https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/love-your-neighbor-as-yourself.html?p=2>