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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

January 26, 2025

Year C, 3 Epiphany, Revised Common Lectionary

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

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“The eyes of all were fixed on him,” it says, here at the very beginning of his ministry, his first sermon in his hometown. Beginnings matter. What people say at beginnings matters. People pay attention.

This week people were paying attention to a sermon by Episcopal bishop Mariann Budde, preached at a beginning, an interfaith prayer service commemorating the inauguration of President Trump. It’s become probably the most famous Episcopalian sermon since Presiding Bishop Michael Curry stirred up the British royalty with his rollicking sermon about God’s love at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle back in 2018. This was a much quieter sermon than that one; Bishop Budde stood in the ornate carved pulpit at Washington National Cathedral, and spoke for about fifteen minutes in a gentle, soft voice. I encourage you to watch it if you haven’t; the whole thing, not only the ending. It was a sermon about unity and the qualities that make for true unity, which is not agreeing on everything but rather respecting one another’s dignity, being honest with one another in our differences, and having the humility to imagine we may not always be in the right.

Then she spoke directly to President Trump, in the tradition of services like weddings or baptisms or ordinations where a preacher might address a word directly to the individuals at the focus, and in the tradition of Biblical prophets and faith leaders through the centuries who have addressed a gospel word to those in authority. She spoke gently and respectfully, but pointedly, as she reminded him that there are those in this country who are fearful about his election. She named two specific groups of people: gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, especially young people, in Democratic, Republican, and independent families everywhere in this country; and immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, who may be in this country without authorization but who are good neighbors, do essential work, pay taxes, are members of our communities and congregations. And she asked the President to have mercy on those who are afraid. She did not offer detailed policy prescriptions; she did not call him names or call him out for anything. She simply asked him, in the decisions that are ahead of him, to exercise the quality of mercy.

Now Bishop Budde's sermon has had what I think you might call a mixed reception. There are those who have criticized her for bringing a note of critique, however gentle, to an inaugural service. President Trump later called her a "so-called bishop" and posted that she should apologize. Even on my own social media feed I've seen negative comments ranging from relatively appropriate and thoughtful to those calling her vicious homophobic slurs, which is all the more curious since Bishop Budde happens to be straight but wears her hair short. On the other hand she's also been catapulted to enormous admiring attention, not only on social media but also in the New York Times and Washington Post and network TV interviews.

And your mileage may vary, but I think Bishop Budde's sermon was very much in the heart of the tradition of how we understand faith and politics in our tradition. As Christians of the Episcopal variety, we believe our faith is not partisan, yet it is political; because everything is political. Politics is about how people live together in community, which is something God is profoundly interested in, as we heard from Jesus in the synagogue: good news to the poor, release to the captives, letting the oppressed go free. So we take a values approach to putting our faith in action in the political sphere. As a church, we don't endorse parties, because the gospel is always bigger than one party, and we don't endorse individuals, because every individual candidate is flawed and imperfect. No party or individual will bring about the kingdom of God. Yet as a church we do take stances on values, and behavior, and issues. The Episcopal Church actually has articulated stances, for example, on border policy—which is that this church opposes mass deportation, and believes the United States has a right to enforce its borders but that that must be proportional and humane and respect the right for people to seek asylum—or on abortion—which is that abortion is a serious ethical decision but a decision that should belong ultimately to the individual rather than to the government. We have stances on a two-state solution in Palestine and on gun regulation and on all kinds of other issues.

And the good news is you don't even have to agree with all or any of those stances to be an Episcopalian in good standing. You don't have to agree with Bishop Budde or me or the person in the pew next to you. In our tradition you will never be excommunicated for how you vote or what your conscience tells you about an issue. What holds us together is our common worship; if you've been baptized and you participate in the worship and sacraments of the Prayer Book and seek to live by the covenant of our baptism, you are an Episcopalian in good standing. So our political stances are not dogma we expect every member to conform to, but simply the sum total of what our democratic process as a church has expressed through statements of our General Convention. That means they carry weight, but it's the weight of a majority voice, not the weight of universal conformity. Today in our Annual Meeting we will elect new leaders to represent our congregation as part of that very same democratic process. We believe the Spirit can work through our differences, that we will not always get it right, but that as members of one Body, just as Paul writes in today's epistle reading, we are bound together into a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Here at Incarnation I think it's fair to say objectively that the majority of our members identify somewhere left of center on our current political spectrum. And I also know beloved, respected members who identify somewhere to the right, or who don't identify with the current spectrum at all. We are not a monolith. But we seek the deeper unity that Bishop Budde spoke about, the unity of respecting one another's dignity and speaking honestly and practicing humility.

And as Christians we do have a lens through which we look at our life as a society. And that lens is, simply put, how are we treating those who are vulnerable. Jesus said, “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do it to me.” So a fair measure of our politics is how it affects those who are poor, those who are sick, those who are on the margins. This is not because poor people are better or more virtuous or more deserving than anyone else. It is because God takes a special interest in their well-being, and so must we. So as Christians we can never participate in politics with an eye just to our own self-interest. Whatever tax policy or education policy or immigration policy or any other policy you think is best, the criterion to judge it by is not “does it make my life easier” but “does it contribute to the common good, and what effect does it have in particular on those who are easily left out?”

When Jesus began his ministry he didn’t seek out Governor Pilate or King Herod. He didn’t give them detailed policy prescriptions. He went out to heal the sick and preach the good news of God’s kingdom. Yet that very mission brought him in the end directly face to face with those men in authority. And when it did, he spoke to them respectfully, and clearly, and without compromise.

And here at the beginning, in the synagogue at Nazareth, he speaks on the words of the prophet Isaiah; words which exhibit God’s focus on the vulnerable. These are not balanced words: Isaiah does not say good news to the rich, freedom for those who are already free, better sight for those who can already see well. In fact there is good news for those people in this message too, but they are not at the focus, not at the center. Here at the beginning, here in this mission statement that sets the tone for the whole, Jesus focuses on good news for the poor, freedom for the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, the year of the Lord’s favor. He focuses on a message of mercy. May we too be people of mercy, of the common good, of faith in action. May we be passionate pursuers of the kingdom of God.