

Sermon

November 24, 2024

Scriptures: 2 Samuel 23:1-7, Psalm 132: 1-13 (14-19), Revelation 1:4b-8, John 18: 33-37

The Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa

Jesus stands before Pilate, the symbol of Roman Empire. Prisoner and King's surrogate stand in a face off that presages what many have seen in their lifetime before us—a clash of faith (of many kinds) and political authority. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Are you a threat to me? Are you a threat to Herod? Jesus, unbowed by the threat of death, replies, “My Kingdom is not from this world. ...For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” Jesus knows his purpose in the world.

Then as now, we ponder tension between our Christian faith and authority of our emerging polis, our national government and its leaders. Encounters like this have happened before. Pope Pius XI was living when Adolph Hitler published *Mein Kampf*, a book that outlined Hitler's antisemitism and designs for world domination. It was a movement called fascism because it exalts nation and race over individual rights and freedoms. In 1925, then, the same year, the Pope honored Christ the King of our souls by declaring “The Reign of Christ the King.”

There is a telling story about the actor Sir Michael Caine where he was to enter from a stage door to confronting a fight on stage. In rehearsal, one actor got so moved by his anger that he threw a chair against the door. Michael Caine recounted. “I opened the door, and I said to the producer who was sitting out in the stalls, ‘Well look, I can’t get in. There’s a chair in my way.’ He said, ‘Well, use the difficulty.’ So I said, ‘What do you mean, use the difficulty?’ He said, ‘Well, if it’s a drama, pick it up and smash it. If it’s a comedy, fall over it.’ This was a line for me for life: Always use the difficulty.”

Some of the most authentic theology and social movements rise with hope out of difficulty. Like Jesus before Pilate who “used the difficulty” to share the meaning of his life, the church and its people have “used the difficulty” to find hope. The author of the hymn we sang last Sunday, “God of grace and God of glory,” “used the difficulty” while the United States was in the throes of the Great Depression between the two World Wars. Harry Fosdick wrote, “Grant us courage, grant us wisdom for the facing of this hour/for the living of these days/lest we miss thy kingdom’s goal/serving thee whom we adore.” In recognition of the plight of the

poor during the Industrial Revolution he found hope in a God of courage, wisdom and love.

Where do we find hope in our difficulty? Where do we find hope in the face of a looming theocracy that theologian Obery Hendricks of Union Theological Seminary calls Christo-fascism. Its triumphalist, hierarchical, and patriarchal Christo-nationalism thrives on chaos, threats and ascendance of white supremacy. Hendricks calls it Christo-fascism because its followers assert American was founded as a white, Christian nation. They demand that Christian orthodoxy and “doctrinal purity” dictate all aspects of American society-- Religion, Family, Education, Government, Media, Arts & Entertainment, and Business, even public school textbooks. Christo-nationalism unites a distorted view of Jesus with secular power and authority. It demonizes not only people of color and cultural minorities but also progressive Christianity, indigenous religions, and others embraced by America’s diverse peoples such as Judaism and Islam.

We cannot dodge the fact that Christian faith has “gone political.” Christo-nationalists have banned library books on Black and indigenous history and life experiences, LGBTQ+ relationships, and the history and experiences of people of other religions such as Judaism or Islam. Christo-nationalism is becoming law in the control of the health care decisions of trans-gender people, restrictions on reproductive justice, restrictions on immigration, denial of climate change, open access to guns, and more.

In this present difficulty, many grieve. In his book about the collapse of commitment to preserve the earth, theologian Brian McLaren describes “the feeling that our civilization’s Jenga tower is about to crumble, our global status quo is about to blow, our scariest worst-case scenarios are about to stop being imaginary.” One day I had to write down what I grieve, what I fear has died with the opening of this Pandora’s box—

- the opportunity for young people to grow up with political leaders who have visions of an egalitarian, just and civil democracy that respects the dignity of every person
- the loss of trust that the “center” will hold
- civility of discourse
- shared moral and political responsibility for society’s vulnerable people
- allegiance to the Constitution and courage to defend it

- humility to respect our interdependence with the natural world, and our responsibility to protect all we've been given in its land, air, water and native plants and animals
- separation of government and institutional religion in political decision-making
- respect for immigrants who built this land and continue to provide food, health care, and other service
- compassion for asylum seekers like our four sets of grandparents and their siblings who left famine-struck homelands for the chance at a better life for their families.

What do you grieve? Lament with psalms that remind you of God's enduring love. Pray. And as Mr. Rogers said, "Look for the helpers" you need, or be one yourself.

Today we hope in Jesus before Pilate. Faced with his executioner, Jesus says, "My Kingdom is not from this world. ...For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." He proclaims his purpose in the world, to be a witness to the truth that God is love, grace, mercy for, with, and within all people and all creation. Jesus stands and goes to the cross firm in his purpose to be "the way, the truth and the life" for us.

Jesus threatened King Herod and his imperial authority, but he never waived from his way of truth and love. Jesus would not be coopted or bought out by Pilate. Remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday? Instead of grasping trappings of royalty, Jesus reveals the evils of Empires both civic and religious by loving its victims—all those hurt by an oppressive class system and abusive power. He lived with and among the poorest of the poor, the shunned, the stigmatized, the people an unjust cultural, economic and political system cast away from the center of community life. "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or one who serves? Is it not the one at table? But I am among you as one who serves." Jesus brought oppressed people back into community, healing and telling them to go on their way with confidence they could once again, or the first time, be able to walk down main street rather than hide in the shadows, love and cherish whoever they wanted to, work to support themselves instead of begging, or walk with dignity into the temple to pray.

Jesus resisted evil by living to reveal a God of love. "I am the way, the Truth and the life." He violated civic, cultural and religious norms that degraded, debased, and dishonored the divine light within all human beings, thereby unmasking them for the evils they were. He rejected the accumulation of wealth, power and privilege of Empire, instead providing what people need for life—food, healing,

mercy, justice and human dignity. He created loving communities to fulfill human needs. Jesus lived the words of the Beatitudes. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

So too have others, like Alexi Navalny who wrote in 2021 when he returned to Russia that because he had become a Christian, “it’s probably easier for me, than for many others, to engage in politics.” He wrote...”Blessed are the those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.’ I’ve always thought that this is more or less an instruction to activity. And so, while certainly not enjoying the place where I am, I have no regrets about coming back, or what I’m doing. It’s fine, because I did the right thing. On the contrary, I feel a real kind of satisfaction.”

Today we find, keep and re-create hope for ourselves and others by joining Jesus’ purpose—to testify ourselves to the truth of “God is love” with our lives. Authenticity is a life lived according to the truth we believe. Before Pilate and threats of death, Jesus the King of Love was authentic—loving, honest, non-violent, and courageous as he “used the difficulty” before Pilate.

Because others lived before us with a purpose of truth and love, America is a democratic republic. Because people in my life lived with loving, honest authenticity before me, I have experienced miracles of forgiveness, redemption and new life. I give thanks every day for the sweetness of life, its most tender, healing moments.

People faithful to truth and love everywhere give me hope—young people like Greta Thunberg and others of Gen Z and Gen alpha who work for the welfare of the earth, economic justice, political rights and the common good despite marginalization and economic hardship. I find hope in the resurgence of community organizing about issues of economic inequality, racial/cultural inequality, and environmental justice we are witnessing here in Sonoma County. I find hope in what Bishop Michael Curry’s proclaims about “The Jesus Movement,” “We’re following Jesus into loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God, with each other and with the earth.”

Pilate asked Jesus, “So you are a king?” Jesus replies, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” This Feast of the Reign of Christ calls us, like Jesus, to lay down all wants and desires that support Empire, bow in thanksgiving to God’s purpose of Truth and Love and rise to be “a kingdom of priests serving [God].”

