

Sermon 7-6-25

Paul Purdue preaching

I read in the New York Times how a Republican Representative has proposed adding Donald Trump to Mount Rushmore. The Times pointed out a few problems with this idea. 1) It might be better to wait a few decades to let history judge who we carve into granite. 2) Mount Rushmore is a completed work of art. 3) There are veins, fissures and seams of pegmatite and rose quartz that likely could collapse or even make Lincoln's nose fall off.

The Bible has always opposed kings, emperors, and lords. 1 Samuel 8 takes us inside the prophets' prayerful lamentation as the Hebrew people want a king. God consoles Samuel "the people are not rejecting you, they have rejected me as their king." The Lord tells Samuel to share how, "The Kings will conscript your sons in the army, force them to work in fields. These lords will take your daughters as perfumers and cooks. They will steal your best fields, vineyards, and olive groves. They will give your lands to their friends and backers. They will make you slaves!" How is it that not too many generations after Egyptian slavery the people shouted "There must be a king over us... to rule over us and to fight our battles for us." ( 1 Sam 8)

Why do we so easily hand over our god-given inalienable human rights to kings, presidents, and tech bro billionaires? Why would any of us who kneel before Jesus' Cross wave any party's banner? Can anyone besides The Lord be our lord?

In 1933, two days before Adolph Hitler became the German Chancellor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 26 year old Pastor preached on a Potsdammerstrasse radio program: "In the church we have only one altar. And that is the altar of the most high, the Only One, the Lord to whom alone is due honor and adoration... We have no auxiliary altars for the adoration of the Furor (or president). The worship of God, not the Furor, happens here at the house of God." (sermon entitled "Gideon") Who is worthy of our allegiance, who is our savior, save The Lord alone?

Why did God name embracing a king as a rejection God? How could putting our deepest trust in a person or political party be sinful? Maybe it was because the people already had the law. They had judges to arbitrate decisions, they had councils, but they longed for someone bigger than themselves. They chose power over human rights.

Now, guided by the Holy Spirit, compassion, reason, science and experience we have rejected or amended parts of the Levitical law as did the prophets, Jesus and the church. However, as a progressive, I need to be careful not to throw everything away. There is a goodness in the rule of law that saves us from powers, principalities, phony saviors, and self-serving politicians. "Honor those who raised you up, don't steal, don't manipulate court proceedings, don't cheat on your partner, don't crave other people's stuff, don't eat just anything, when you are sick stay home and don't start a pandemic, be careful with your agricultural practises, let the land rest, don't marry your sister, love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 20:18), do not favor the rich in a lawsuit, release

debts every generation, don't charge heavy interest, do not seek revenge or hold a grudge, never cheat immigrants, treat immigrants as the native born, do not mislabel products or altar scales." The people wanted more than a legal code, justice, and courts, they wanted someone bigger than the law- a king. God hated this! God values the needs of the people over the power of special interests. Jesus did not come to be king, but to set up an upside down kingdom, where the least of us matters as much as the most powerful, where diversity, equity and inclusion reign. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Samuel's prophecy came home to roost as King "Solomon drafted forced laborers from all Israel; over thirty thousand men..." to build the Temple! (1 Kings 5) How did they do this to themselves?

In Matthew 20, Jesus tells us what we already know, "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them." But Jesus calls us to build something different: "It must not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant... I came not to be served but to serve."

In the temptation story, the devil offers Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory". If you could command every army, every king, every secretary of the treasury, you could feed a lot of people, build a lot of homes, and end a lot of wars! Jesus rejects the devil's offer out of hand, "Go away, Satan, it is written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve God alone." Jesus does not come to anoint anyone as a king, but to serve everyone, lovingly giving away his life to save our world.

In our mid-Luke passage, the Roman Empire is ruling the world. In Luke 9, King Herod, who executed John the Baptist to silence him, wonders if Jesus might be a reincarnated version of the prophet. In a world with evil kings, Jesus sends out 72 folks to transform the world. How much difference will 72 people make?

Jesus tells us there are not enough people for the work, we are a minority movement, pray for more workers, recruit them.

Jesus tells little groups meeting in church basements, praying together on the state-house steps, repairing homes in Kentucky hills: "there will be opposition". "Go, I'm sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves." There are wolves, they will circle Jesus and crown him with thrones and dress him in a borrowed robe. Jesus tells us to pray, deliver us from evil even as we fix our eyes on God's kingdom, power and glory. We will be underfunded. "Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals, stay in houses, eat what people give you" These little groups resisting evil and healing the world will have to rely on generous people, communal goodwill and the power of God.

But what does Jesus send this little band to do? Did Jesus lay out a series of policy papers describing Fed policy, the world bank, or the value of a Department of Education?

No, Jesus sends us out to serve: “cure the sick and proclaim ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” Jesus’ first sermon in Luke 4, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, and the Jesus image of final judgment in Matthew 25 adds meat to the bones of good news and healing: “Bring good news for poor people. Release captives, restore sight to blind people, free all who are oppressed, proclaim God’s favor and liberation. Be humble, be pure hearted, be a peace-maker, do the right thing, show mercy, be a beacon of hope, don’t stay angry, seek reconciliation, love enemies, don’t show off, stop living for stuff, don’t serve wealth, don’t judge, forgive, watch out for phonies, do the will of God. Feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned.”

But what if the people and their kings do not respond? Interestingly enough, Jesus proclaims judgement on the cities that resisted the kingdom’s good news and free healthcare. Jesus names names: “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades”. I have some Good News, I’m not Jesus and neither are you, so let’s be careful in our judging, even as Jesus gives us a protest symbol of taking off our shoes and shaking the dust off them!

Despite unjust kings, howling wolves, and unbelief in his adopted hometown, Jesus says “go, I am sending you” to serve and bring healing, to shine a light of hope and transformation. Jesus anoints no one as a king, indeed we may be rejecting God when we elevate anyone above the rest of us. There is only one king, one altar one lord, one savior. Jesus sends us out to create an upside down kingdom where everyone is welcomed and has everyone. Jesus sends us out to serve and in serving we can “know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’

In the face of kings, powers and principalities, service may feel like weak resignation. However, service is the only healing way to transform the world. Belmont’s good friend, pastor Jefferson Furtado writes of service in a yet unpublished book:

“Service is “holy encounter”. When we feed the hungry, visit the sick, clothe the naked, or comfort the grieving, we are participating in something sacred. These moments are not peripheral to our faith; they are liturgical. They are embodied expressions of God’s grace and signs of the coming kingdom.... In serving others, we meet Christ himself (Matthew 25:40). A bowl of soup becomes a vessel of divine mercy. A visit to a nursing home becomes an encounter with God’s presence. A shared meal becomes communion. These moments blur the line between sacred and secular, reminding us that God’s grace saturates the world and meets us in human need...As we serve, we are not only agents of grace but recipients of it. We are changed by those we serve. We are drawn deeper into the mystery of God’s love.” (Jefferson M Furtado, as yet unpublished book “Rooted in Discipleship”)

Service first makes a difference by changing us. In service to others, we encounter Christ and through service we become Christlike. God’s kingdom arrives within us, long before the world is transformed. So let us keep on shining the sacramental life, feeding,

clothing and fighting for people. And when the wolves howl and false messiahs appear, "serve god alone" And as you give for life away in service "know this:, the kingdom of God has come near'. Amen.