

Sermon 6-21-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Good News Not Everyone Wants to Hear

I lived at home while going to the University of Kentucky to save money and worked at the YWCA Afterschool program. Every weekday, I parallel parked a 15 passenger van in two school zones, played wiffle ball, soccer, went swimming, double dutched jump rope, went to the library, and helped with homework. It was a great job! As a sophomore, I was elected the worship chair of the Baptist Student Union. Our Tuesday Night Together's attendance almost doubled as we used convention seed money to bring in state and national speakers. Our BSU coordinated the speakers with the University's Women's Studies, African American Studies, History, and Social Work departments. Our intramural flag football team lost to the ROTC guys in the campus flag football championship. Sometime during the spring semester, my home church asked me to take a job as the assistant to the youth director. Feeling God's call, I left my job at the YWCA giving up two dollars an hour, and a fixed schedule to work for my church. If you worked 40 hours, the church paid for 20! Still, I was excited. I lined up the remaining Tuesday Night's Together speakers and met with our Director Twilia Green to tell her that I was planning to resign from my office. I expected Twilia to be excited for my opportunity. Instead she crumpled her face in a frown, and after an awkward pause said, "I wish you had involved us in your decision." A bit confused, I asked, "Involved who?" She forced a smile, "Us, the Executive Committee, maybe me as director or the worship team... you know: us." I immediately felt a wave of embarrassment. It did not enter my mind to consult with others, even team members I prayed with each week. I grew up with a gospel of personal faith. Every worship service ended with a time of decision. The altar call asked us to think about the word of God, count the cost, bow your head, close your eyes, pray and make your decision all by yourself... just me and Jesus. If someone professed faith, we called it a "personal decision for Christ" and received Jesus as "your personal Lord and Savior". It all fit nicely into our American rugged individualism. Twilia's comment, "I wish you had invited us into your decision," revealed a crack in my privatized faith bubble.

A private personal faith is out of touch with Jesus who built a team, discussed parables with the disciples, and sent us out in mission saying, "As you go," (which is plural in the Greek but can read as singular in English), "As ya'll go proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'" The kin-dom of heaven is a team or community of people, not an individual effort.

I think people say our personal faith bubbles lead us to say "do not preach about politics!" Our culture treats faith like a private matter. A personal faith can ignore the public good. A private faith is not about partnerships, collaboration, or shared solutions. Privatized faith finds all its solutions in individual actions. Jesus preached about a kin-dom giving us the commandment to love others in the same manner as we love ourselves and to treat people in the same way we want to be treated. The greatest command and the Golden Rule are not matters of personal faith but of public action.

Jesus comes preaching a kingdom that has come near on earth as is heaven. That "kingdom" imagery leads some Christians to images of spiritual warfare thinking that there is war on Christmas, with the battle cry, "Happy Holidays." Jesus, our Lord, Christ, the anointed one or King, brings a peaceable kingdom in contrast to the images of kings, crowns, knights, palaces, flags, fanfares, swords, and battles. Jesus flips over our images recasting king, kingdom, and Lord, "*You know how rulers lord power over the people, and how the so called 'great ones' are tyrants. It must not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must become a servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be last; just as I did not come to be served but to serve, and to give away my life for others.*" (Matthew 20) I'll admit never

deeply hearing the word kin-dom until Pastor Kate's interview, but kin-dom points us closer to who Christ our King is. The kin-dom rejects swords, wealth, status, modeling service, sacrifice, justice and love. Kinship with Christ unites us into a family "watching over one another in love" (General Rules UMC). The slogan "Go proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near!'" reminds us that we belong to a Jesus movement, we are part of team Jesus, doing work right now on earth, right here, in our midst.

The kin-dom of heaven breaks apart our bubbles and unites in service and sacrifice for the public good. Friends, love of neighbor, stranger, enemy means that the kin-dom of God is deeply political. The church and political leaders recognized Jesus as a political figure that lovingly opposed their self-serving empires. They hung a divisive political sign over the cross: hail King of the Jews. Both priests and police mocked Jesus with taunts and a crown of thorns. John the Baptist died for calling out king Herod. Jesus calls out King Herod as well and spends a chapter blasting church leaders that carefully follow minor rules while neglecting what matters: justice, mercy, and faith. (Matthew 23:23) Rome would not have worried about people living in a bubble of personal faith if it never moved the needle of public good. However, less than a week after flipping over the tables in the temple, shutting down commerce, governors conspired with mega-churches to crucify Jesus.

Marcus Borg puts it like this: *The "proclamation of Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Saviour directly countered Roman Imperial theology.... Jesus was Lord and the emperor was not! "Jesus is Lord" was high treason!... (The)message challenged the normalcy of civilization, then and now, with an alternative vision of how life on earth can and be.*" (Marcus Borg- The First Paul) The Gospel is deeply committed to the public good; that is political.

Hear the words Jesus gives us as he sends us to open healthcare and mental health clinics and proclaim this message "the kingdom of heaven has come near.' ...Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged before "congregations" (we face no threats from "synagogues" and Jesus and the disciples are Jewish). On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them... "The student is not above the teacher... If the church called Jesus "Beelzebub", how much more the members of Christ's household!

To paraphrase, Jesus is saying speak up and be prepared; you may catch a little hell. Our passage lines up with the headlines. It was my deep privilege to serve with Rev. [Neelley Hicks](#) for two years. She is one of the most compassionate, singly focused, loving lights I know. Neelley wrote, "I stood and raised my voice today. A bill was before the legislature that asked for \$3,500 to move a statue of Grand Wizard Nathan Bedford Forrest to the Tennessee museum from the state capitol. This would preserve history without giving him a place of honor. When our elected officials voted down spending the money (with a rainy day fund of \$1 BILLION) I stood up and raised my arms and said loudly, "I bring good news! I am Rev. Neelley Hicks and I have good news that we have the \$3,500 needed to move the statue." In the end, three clergy women including our beloved Ingrid McIntyre, were escorted by armed state troopers off the public square.

So brace yourself, I am going to not simply preach about how the gospel is political, I am going to say something political: Rev. Neelley Hicks' disruptive announcement of the Good News ("we have the \$3500 needed to move the statue") counters those who by intention or ignorance keep up marble edifices paying homage to slave traders and their Confederacy which enshrined slavery within its Constitution. The placement of anyone in the state house is not simply a matter of historical record but is a deep honor. We must not give honor to those who used the whip, the lash, and the sword to oppress and murder beloved people of color nor anyone who rode through the night as a hooded terrorist.

But let me be clear, I am not suggesting uniting church and state. Terrible things happen when the church gets too close to the state. In solidarity with Christ, we must all fiercely oppose all forms of theocracy everywhere, remembering how Christ was crucified by a coalition of

religious and government leaders. The Apostle Paul tells us that “the law kills but the spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3). Why would we legislate moral codes that can’t change anyone’s heart? Let us remember the disaster of John Calvin’s Geneva. It banned Catholics from office, naming children after saints, dancing, cursing, drunkenness, gambling, cards, theater, and burned a scientist at the stake for a bad theology of the Trinity. You will know them by their fruit! (Matthew 7)

There is a deeper reason to separate church and state. Jesus tells us all the laws can be summed up by loving our neighbor as our self and treating folks in the same ways we want to be treated! (Matthew 7:12; 22:40) *“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”* How can I love my neighbor and compel them to believe as I do? We must not use the government to enforce our religious vision upon someone else. That is simply immoral. But we must work for the public good.

A diverse kin-dom is richer than any homogenous bubble. We need the dissenters, the dancers, and the theater majors to perfect our union and craft a purer public good. If a Muslim friend asks for a footwashing station in a new dorm, would love object? Would we rather someone wash their feet in a common sink or not practice their faith? We are so easily binary. We lock in on one right vision and way. We struggle to hold two notions at once. We rightly decry police brutality. We march against militarized policing and racial profiling, but do we demonize people who are peace officers? Years ago, one of our UMYF partners was a senior officer who could feed 50 teenagers without breaking a sweat. At a Beersheba youth retreat he whispered to me, “I’ll be back in a couple of hours...duty calls.” His siren sounded once he hit the main road. He made it back by our campfire. He and I sat up well past curfew. He laughed off my incoculuse question, “How was your trip?”, but the silence beckoned and he opened up. He missed our great water balloon fight to spend the afternoon measuring, exploring and documenting the details of a gruesome crime scene. I listened in stunned silence; what does that kind of work do to your soul? Christ’s kin-dom calls us to strive to find what we hold in common, what is the deepest public good.

So what do we do, how can we preach a political Gospel while demanding a separation of church and state? Are we just too broken and binary for that?

Perhaps we might begin by remembering Jesus taught us to “Love God with everything you got, and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36) *“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”* (Matthew 7:12) What if we became tireless advocates for our neighbors, strangers, and even the opposition? What if we called out the rulers of business and statehouse who serve themselves instead of others? What if we remembered that Jesus told us to pay our taxes and you can’t serve God and wealth?

And maybe we might proclaim the good news of the kin-dom by working with others to offer free healthcare and provide mental health services. Maybe we might envision a world where the hungry are fed, the thirsty have clean water, everyone enjoys some new clothes, the sick are cared for, prisons strive to rehabilitate. (Matthew 25) Peace is our hallmark, justice is our minimum standard, and we fight for everyone’s rights, prosperity and freedom. That is what Christ’s kin-dom is all about and the kind of secular governments we Christians should seek to build. The only place in Matthew 25 Jesus speaks of theology is when the King corrects those who thought they knew so much but did so little to physically help somebody. Amen.