

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 12:32-40

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Y'all, I'm wore out. I've got this voice echoing in my head that says I've got to stop reading the news. It's exhausting being this angry all the time. And I'll tell you why I'm angry. It's not because I'm a sore loser. It's not because I'm an obstructionist. It's not even because I disagree with a few policies here and there. I'm angry because I've bought into a myth, and I'm seeing nearly every day how easy it is to hide behind that myth. Y'all ever heard of the separation of church and state? That's the myth. And I'm mad about it. See, I'm a Christian, that much ought to be obvious. And I, more or less, vote with my Christian leanings. I believe in the separation of church and state at a government level, but I'm real bad at separating them out for my own self. But I've bought into the myth that that's how the game is supposed to go. Vote your conscience, but then, when the government does its thing, understand that they aren't taking Jesus into account all that much.

Should they? I mean, from a scriptural standpoint, it's complicated. No government of this world can be trusted to live fully into the word of God, so there's that. From a theocratic standpoint, a religiously backed government is either everything you've ever dreamed of or everything that's haunted your nightmares, depending on which side you're on. For simplicity's sake, probably best to leave people's religious beliefs be and just govern from there. That's a pretty solid myth, right? Problem is, it's a myth. In some ways, it's a myth in the ancient sense. It is foundational to what we believe about our country, and it shapes how we do things, at least in theory. But it's also a myth in the modern sense, which is to say it's not true. Here's a quick example. Name a non-Christian president. Now, I know that's just asking for debate, but let me posit this. Take Mayor Pete, one of the current Democratic hopefuls. He's an Episcopalian from Indiana, and his detractors say that when he talks about Jesus, you don't have to listen because "Episcopalians aren't really Christian." Not only do you have to appear to be Christian, you have to appear to be the right kind of Christian.

Now, that's frustrating, but it doesn't exactly make me angry. What makes me angry is far, far worse than mudslinging. What makes me angry is, once the mud slaps the face of our myths, dries out, and settles into place, then another fistful of mud comes flying, and the mud piles higher, until the myth is totally obscured. While I'm still trying to play by the rules on my side of things, the mud keeps on flying, and this apparently-not-really-a-Christian is expected to keep his mouth shut while those throwing mud tell me what Christianity is about.

See, there's a rumor floating around that preachers aren't supposed to preach politics. And to a degree, that's true. Since 1954, there've been a series of laws limiting charitable organizations, including churches, from certain kinds of political involvement. We can't endorse candidates. We can't participate in campaigns. We can't put up pictures of our favorite candidates and pretend we just thought they looked nice. But we can speak about issues. This is all made as clear as the mud flung around the halls of government, naturally, in the IRS tax code.

Ok, so legally speaking, we can talk about issues. But should we? In his own tax code, Jesus says we outta render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar. But that's not all he has to say about politics. He fled political persecution as a child, returned to his homeland, and told parable after parable about the Kingdom of God. Y'all, that's a direct challenge to the empire of the day. It was an opposing kingdom Jesus preached. From our perspective, that's just preaching, but from the Romans' perspective, that's treason. Nearly everything he preached went against the way things were normally done. Don't go to war. Love your neighbors. Love your enemies. Forgive those that do you wrong and stop what you're doing to save the injured in the ditch. Have mercy.

“Well,” you might say, “sometimes Jesus went a little too far. Surely that’s all?” Sorry, politics-from-the-pulpit naysayers, but that’s just not so. Paul and the other Apostles kept on getting themselves arrested, preaching against the political world wherever they landed. Revelation calls for the eventual destruction of the Roman Empire. Daniel’s about the eventual destruction of the Babylonian Empire. Pharaoh was a bad leader. Deborah was a good one. Gideon got himself in trouble when he let power go to his head. Nearly all of the prophets preach politics and, more importantly, point to the downfall of Israel as the people slipped further and further from following God.

But even if there wasn’t a politics preaching pedigree to lean on, there is another thing. We Christian people are supposed to live as though our faith, our God, our story actually matters. You will see and hear all sorts of things from all sorts of folks telling you what our faith, our God, and our stories have to say. I’ll add my voice to the cacophony, and you can sort out what that means for you.

But here’s a few reminders. There are over 2,000 verses in the Bible that talk about money. Nearly all of them are warnings about accumulating too much wealth or chasing that accumulation. Jesus talks about money more than any other single issue, and most of the time he’s telling us to get rid of it.

There are an immense amount of references to foreigners. With just a handful of exceptions, they carry the same message: “Do not oppress the alien in your land.” That’s a quote from Zechariah, but it just as easily could’ve come from Exodus or Leviticus or Numbers or Deuteronomy or Matthew or Hebrews.

Throughout scripture, God tells God’s people to care for each other, but more specifically, God tells us to care for widows and orphans. In the Book of Acts, this took up so much time, we had to go and invent deacons just to meet the demand. Remember when Jesus said, “Suffer the little children?” That wasn’t a command to cause them suffering. It was a command to spare them suffering. Take them in, when they need to be taken in, and love them.

And then there’s the Kingdom of God. I toss this term around a lot, sort of assuming everyone knows what it means, but maybe that shorthand can’t be taken for granted any more. The Kingdom of God is upside down, and it absolutely is a political statement, though it’s not limited to politics. It’s bigger. The Kingdom of God is the realization of God’s intent for this world triumphing over humanity’s selfishness. In the Kingdom of God, there is no division, no violence, no persecution. In the Kingdom of God, all people are valued, loved, and respected. And in the Kingdom of God, no one and nothing is broken. Jesus says this is something both already in place though not fully realized, and still yet to come in its fullness. We’re there, but we ain’t there yet. And to get there, there’s some things that have got to change.

I really do try not to get overtly political. Sometimes I’m better at toeing that line than others. Sometimes I should probably step further in. But most of the time I try to stay out of it. Preach the Gospel and let y’all figure it out. But -- and I keep coming back to that “but” -- when the movers in the political world proclaim a “gospel” of their own, or when they hide behind *the* Gospel and do whatever seems right to them, I cannot abide. My job is to preach the Gospel, and that includes correcting false teachings. I started off this rant of a sermon by admitting that I’d been hoodwinked into believing that church and state remain separate. Y’all, as long as politicians feel the need to tell you what the Bible says to justify their actions, it ain’t separate. And more so, when they feel they can get away with anything by deploying scripture, it really ain’t separate.

When Isaiah starts his 60-some odd chapter rant about the failings of Israel’s politicians, he starts off by comparing them to Sodom and Gomorrah. When I mention those cities, it conjures images, I’m sure, of fire and brimstone, and probably some very uncomfortable things about human sexuality. But let me remind you what another political prophet, Ezekiel, had to say: “The sin of Sodom was this: she had excessive pride, excess of

food, and prosperous ease, but she did not aid the poor and the needy.” One more time for the folks in the back. What led to the downfall of Sodom was pride, gluttony, laziness, and a total disregard for those in need. If you hear echoes of a self-serving political world, buckle up.

See, I’m wore out. I’m wore out because the Kingdom of God feels awfully far away.

And I’m wore out, because there’s too many folks telling me that that Kingdom of God isn’t really about serving God.

And I’m wore out, because those folks are loud, and people listen, and people believe.

Jesus tells us to keep the house ready, even while we’re serving the servants, keep the house ready for the day he comes back. It’s a sort of cosmic pop-quiz. How’d we do? When Jesus left this place to us, what did we do with that freedom? What did we do with our money, our orphans, our foreigners? When Jesus left that Kingdom of God to us, what did we let our kings get away with?

I fear when he comes back, he’ll see the truth, but I pray he’ll forgive us even then.