

Sermon preached by Beth Hilgartner on
August 7, 2022 at Randolph, NH

Genesis 15:1-6
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16
Luke 12:32-40

God be in my words and in my speaking. God be in our hearts and in our understanding.

In my preaching, I try very hard to discern what the Spirit is calling me to say. Almost always, I begin this process by studying the lectionary texts assigned for the Sunday, and from that beginning, my sermons tend to be structured with some exegesis at the start, explaining some of the (often varied) interpretations of the lessons, move to identifying the salient points and themes in the lessons, and finally to connect things to our daily life and faith.

This week, the Spirit pushed me in a different direction. There's so much going on in the world, and it feels so wrong to retreat into a more-or-less comfortable pattern of explication and gentle theologizing. I hope that what I have to say will speak to you, and I apologize if it does not; I'm doing my best to be faithful, and in this, I think it's important for me to take the risk of abandoning my comfortable routine (dare I say "rut?") for what feels like a more prophetic message.

I was ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church in 1986; and since then, I've seen a lot of change in the church and in the world. Way back then, the reaction I got from people learning for the first time that I was an Episcopal priest was something along the lines of "I didn't realize women could be priests." Over the years, women in

ministry became rather less of a surprise, but reactions from new people or unchurched friends tended to be more along the lines of: "I'm surprised; I thought you were too intellectual to be religious." (Which was, I think, polite code for "I thought you were too smart to believe that superstitious God-nonsense.") Occasionally, I got someone who said something like: "But you're awfully radical, politically, to be a minister," which used to surprise me, until I realized that for a long, long time, the church (or at least the liberal Protestant denominations) had tried hard to portray itself as a prime mover of Capitalist respectability. You know: move to a new area, join a church – of the denomination that most closely matches your class affiliation; get to know others just like you, and to do "good works" (or at least write checks that support others doing "good works") of a non-threatening sort that everyone can agree is worthwhile.

Liberation theologian Dom Helder Camara expressed the conundrum thus: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist." The message to clergy (again, in the liberal Protestant denominations) was not to mix ministry and politics. I remember a New Yorker cartoon depicting a very well-dressed, rather snooty-looking couple walking down the stone steps of an imposing (had to be Episcopal) church, with a minister greeting other congregants, behind them. The woman said to the man with her: "On the whole, he does a good job with the sermon. It's so hard to avoid offending people like us."

19th Century journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne once wrote: "The job of a newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." This is even more applicable to the church; we need both to feed the hungry AND confront the systems that oppress the poor, even (especially) when it makes us uncomfortable. When we

focus, instead, on comforting the already comfortable, we lose touch with our call to God's work of reconciliation and justice; and when the church-as-a-whole takes a "don't rock the boat" attitude, it becomes increasingly irrelevant to the lives of people beyond the community which gathers.

Today, the reaction to my admitting to a life of faith and a commitment to the Christian enterprise is, very often, overtly hostile. "Christian" has become synonymous, in the minds of the general public, with the judgmental, right-wing, evangelical crusade against women's reproductive health, minorities, LBGTQ+, gay marriage, and just about every positive, inclusive effort at justice and reconciliation one could name. "Christians" are the problem on the Supreme Court; "Christians" are the ones trying to shove their religious agenda down the throats of everyone else, etc., etc. But the agenda of the Evangelical Right (as I've taken to calling them, because even "Biblical Literalists" doesn't capture it) the agenda of the Evangelical Right is NOT a "Christian" agenda. A truly Christian agenda would be more like what Jesus says to his followers in today's Gospel lesson: "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven ... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." A truly Christian agenda would include caring for the weakest and most vulnerable, ensuring inclusion to the marginalized, and justice to the oppressed. Instead, the Evangelical Right, despite its emphasis on Scripture and God's Word, bases its approach on the parts of the Hebrew Scriptures that portray a God of judgment, and that promise that those who obey God's commandments will prosper as members of God's chosen tribe, while those who do not follow the commandments will suffer. There is very, very little of Jesus in the Evangelical Right's agenda. After all,

Jesus said uncomfortable things like: take up your cross daily and follow; and turn the other cheek; and that it will be more difficult for a rich person to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Jesus told his followers that they should forgive the ones who sin against them not seven times, but seventy times seven. Jesus said very radical things (for his time – and even for ours) and taught that to enter into a relationship with God, all that was necessary was to open oneself up to it. One didn't have to follow all the complicated rituals and make the expensive offerings required by the Temple; God was as close as your breath, and eager to engage. "The Kingdom of God has come near." He encouraged people to sell all their possessions and give them to the poor; he told stories that made the priests and Levites look bad, and cast a Samaritan as a hero (which would, today, be rather like me telling a story in which a Russian oligarch, or an international terrorist is the good guy); when shown a woman taken in adultery (for which the punishment according to the Law was being stoned to death), he challenged the crowd: "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." And when no one was willing to condemn and execute her, he told the woman, "Then neither shall I condemn you. Go and sin no more." He invited sinners and tax collectors to eat with him; he welcomed, spoke to, healed and taught women, and children, and the poor – and not just the well-off men who were the mainstay and support of the Temple, and who were also, largely, collaborators with the hated Roman oppressors.

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus says not one word about abortion; not one word about homosexuality. He is careful to make distinctions between what is owed to the secular powers of the world, versus what is God's: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." His message is constantly one of

inclusion: building a longer table, not a higher wall; one of forgiveness; one of empowerment (go in peace; your faith has healed you). In story after story, Jesus is portrayed not as the ferocious judge who blasts “evildoers,” and strengthens the already-powerful, but as the one bringing healing and reconciliation to the poorest of the poor, to lepers, women, foreigners; he even heals the child of a Roman centurion. He acts out of love, not judgment. And he calls each and every one of us who embrace his teachings to follow his example, and to follow his example *without* promises that everything will work out well for us. Christians are called to follow Christ; and we must always remember that Jesus’ path led him — not to a successful career, followed by a comfortable and happy retirement — but to crucifixion.

The repressive agenda of the Evangelical Right is not an attempt to make America a “Christian” nation, even if some of its proponents deeply believe that it is. It is, instead, a very cynical attempt, on the part of the political right, to strengthen and codify autocracy and oligarchy by exploiting some people’s desire to have simple, straightforward answers — a clear roadmap, even a checklist that shows who is “in” and who is “out” — (simple, straightforward answers) in a complex, ambiguous, and nuanced world. The “culture wars,” the arguments about putting “prayer” — meaning those religious expressions that the Evangelical Right recognizes and supports — (putting “prayer”) back in public schools, legislation like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill, or forbidding teaching “Critical Race Theory,” are all massive distractions to cover the true agenda of the oligarchs and autocrats. And they are effective. They look simple; they wind people up (on both sides of the issue). But they are not the real agenda. The real agenda is about protecting the interests of the rich, and maintaining in every

possible way (from gerrymandering to voter suppression) the ability of the party most supportive of the wealthy to stay in power.

Let me give you an example: In the midst of all the (understandable) outrage and protest about the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and the fear of subsequent decisions that would roll back other rights and protections we have come to regard as "settled law," the Court slipped in another decision: one that is potentially even more damaging to the workings of a democratically elected government of, by, and for the people. In *West Virginia v. EPA*, the court abridges the ability of the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate the environmental practices of energy sector businesses in the interests of the public good. Though this decision is fairly narrowly focused, it provides a framework for large corporations to challenge Federal oversight — and it further signals the willingness of the court to uphold the interests of corporations over the government's ability to regulate them in order to protect the public. We all know that we can't rely on industry to regulate itself. Its focus is always the bottom line — and on a short timeline, like the fiscal year, or even the current quarter, not on the environmental consequences 10, 30 or 100 years down the road. Corporations are not structured to ascribe value and cost to shared public resources (like clean air and water); and without government regulation (and stringent penalties for violating such rules), there's absolutely no incentive for them to consider the wider, long-term implications of their business models. They market tobacco products, opioids, and guns to susceptible and vulnerable people, despite evidence that their products adversely affect everyone. They exploit their workers, and (when corporate concentration allows) fix prices so that consumers, not shareholders, carry the lion's

share of the burden of rising costs. If the federal government can no longer regulate businesses, we will be looking at a system which is *entirely* organized around profits and power. And, even though the whole population, from Highland Park to the inner city, is affected, the biggest losers in such a system are the poor and the powerless — the very people Christ challenges us to serve, protect, and welcome into community.

The Evangelical Right (and the right wing political strategists, pundits, and political “leaders” who are exploiting them) are not going to establish a *truly* Christian nation. If our country were to be organized around the kinds of principles Jesus expresses in the Gospel accounts, the emphasis would be on love, justice, reconciliation, inclusion. I remind myself, daily, that God loves all of us — even Mitch McConnell and Ron DeSantis — and (this is the really hard part) that I am called to love them, too. I also remind myself, daily, that God forgives our sins, so the fact that I am having a lot of trouble loving people on the fascist/white supremacist/oligarchy side of the political divide doesn’t remove me from God’s love, grace, and favor. But it also doesn’t excuse me from working on my attitude, and from finding ways to disagree (even passionately!) with others without demonizing them. We human beings are very, very, very good at rationalization. It’s entirely possible that someone like Greg Abbott actually believes that the law he signed — the one that puts enforcement of Texas’ ban on abortions into the hands of self-appointed citizen vigilantes — (that the anti-abortion law he signed) will exert a positive influence on women’s lives.

Okay. That’s a stretch. I’m pretty sure the calculus he’s using on that one is more about reelection and making the one-issue voters in his state happy, than about actually

improving the lives of women. But I don't know that. And — as I keep reminding myself — no matter what his inner dialogue is, no matter whether he's cynically plotting his reelection, vindictively trying to punish and oppress women, or honestly attempting to protect innocent fetuses — God loves him; and I'm called to find some way to love him (or at least to treat him with the dignity and justice he merits as one of God's beloved children), even as I prepare myself to work to overturn *everything* he stands for.

Building a *truly* Christian nation would be a very nuanced, ambiguous, complex, and difficult enterprise. Jesus embraced and included everyone — even Samaritans, tax collectors, women, Roman soldiers, and the rich. Jesus shared finite resources to demonstrate that there was actually abundance. (Remember the loaves and fish? The miracle of that event wasn't that he created more fish and bread, but rather that he transformed a hoarding mentality into a sharing one, and the people discovered or recognized that there was *already* enough for everyone to be fed and satisfied.) Jesus taught that prayer should be personal and private, not performance art. ("When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who stand on the street corners — or at the 50 yard line — so that their prayer may be seen by others...") Jesus taught a new way of being community, a new way of interacting with one another and God; Jesus didn't institutionalize his teachings — that was Paul — and he preached against what he saw as the Temple's efforts to mediate a person's relationship with God. Jesus distilled the whole of the Law and prophets into two points. Two simple (and yet, almost impossible to do) points: Love God; love your neighbor. (And by the way, EVERYONE is your neighbor.)

Jesus said that the people who followed him would be recognizable to the rest of the world by the love they showed to others. That – LOVE – is the heart of Christianity; and that is precisely what is missing most egregiously from the Evangelical Right's agenda. I don't think love can be legislated; but judgment can; hatred can; oppression can. Narrow minded bigotry is pretty easily distilled into talking points appropriate for Fox News. The concept of "freedom" can be perverted into a kind of toxic lack of responsibility — freedom from restraints, freedom from inhibitions — instead of nurtured to encourage people to embrace the freedom to do new, amazing and creative things that serve the common good, the freedom to realize their God-given potential, the freedom to be and become the person God knows and loves. But if we want to call ourselves Christians, if we want to reclaim and redeem that word in the secular public mind, we have to be a lot more active with our love and justice, a lot more vocal about what Jesus actually taught and actually stood for. It will be uncomfortable; it may be dangerous (and no, we're absolutely NOT promised that if we're faithful enough, we'll be safe); but love is always a risk — and in my opinion, it is always a risk worth taking.

In the name of Christ,
AMEN.

