

LESSONS IN LIVING



“God is not a Christian: Confronting Christian Nationalism”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by James Talarico
October 22, 2023

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 4:8-11

The Devil then took Jesus up a very high mountain and displayed all the dominions of the world in their magnificence, promising, “All these I will give you if you fall down and worship me.” At this, Jesus said to the Devil, “Away with you, Satan! Scripture says, ‘You will worship the Most High God; God alone will you adore.’” At that the Devil left him.

aspires to greatness must serve the rest. And anyone among you who wishes to be first must serve the needs of all, as if enslaved—just as the Chosen One came not to be served but to serve, and to die in ransom for many.”

Matthew 18:1-4

The disciples came up to Jesus with the question, “Who is the greatest in the kindom of heaven?” Jesus called for a little child to come and stand among them. Then Jesus said, “The truth is, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kindom* of heaven. Those who make themselves as humble as this child are the greatest in the kindom* of heaven.*

*The word ‘kindom’, often used by mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, replaces ‘kingdom’ because it represents an egalitarian realm and emphasizes our familial relationship with each other.

Sermon

sermon, and he sent me this. It's the top reasons beer is better than religion:

#1: When you have beer, you don't knock on people's doors trying to give it away.

#2: There are laws against forcing beer on minors who can't think for themselves.

#3: Nobody's ever been burned at the stake because of their favorite brand of beer.

#4: You don't have to wait more than 2000 years for a second beer. And last, if you've devoted your life to beer, there are groups to help you.

My granddad was a Baptist preacher. I've been a member of this church since I was two years old, and now I'm in Seminary studying to become a minister myself. My faith means more to me than anything. But if I'm being very honest, sometimes I hesitate before telling someone I'm a Christian. There is a cancer on our religion. Until we confess the sin that is Christian nationalism and excise it

nationalism. It is the worship of power—social power, economic power, political power, in the name of Christ, and it is a betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth. He told us we would know them by their fruits. Jesus includes, Christian nationalism excludes. Jesus liberates. Christian nationalism controls. Jesus saves. Christian nationalism kills. Jesus started a universal movement based on mutual love. Christian nationalism is a sectarian movement based on mutual hate. Jesus came to transform the world. Christian nationalism is here to maintain the status quo. They have co-opted the Son of God. They've turned this humble rabbi into a gun-toting, gay-bashing, science-denying, money-loving, fear mongering fascist. And, it is incumbent upon all Christians to confront it, and denounce it.

Christian nationalism is on the rise. Two years ago, Christian nationalists stormed the US Capitol, killing police officers while carrying crosses and signs reading “Jesus Saves.” Last year, Christian nationalists on the US Supreme Court overturned Roe versus Wade, allowing states like ours to outlaw abortion even in cases of rape and incest. And, as we speak, two Christian nationalist billionaires are trying to replace public schools in Texas with private Christian schools. We are closer

exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermo Transcription Project.



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practice. Neuroscientists tell us that we can become kinder, more empathetic, if we work at it. Things like love, peace and hope, they require strength training—a gym for the heart. And so, every week we gather here to sing our songs and tell our stories. Just for the opportunity to, in the words of Thich Nhat Hahn, “Dwell in the ultimate together just for a moment.”

And that's almost better than a cold glass of beer.

I invite you now to your own reflection on these words.

Benediction

I want to remind everybody about Bridget's gathering after this. She'll be sharing the great books that she has written. If you have the opportunity, please join us for that. We're grateful that James is here (well, he's here other Sundays, too!) while Jim is on study leave. Your staff is grateful for the opportunity to be among you and to make our world a better place for all.

Each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call “God.” That spirit

Their crucified teacher taught them a different way of being human, and they intended to follow it. The early church was a revolutionary community built on radical love; a peculiar people who shared all their possessions and refused to participate in the economy, the military or the culture. The book of Acts tells us that the first Christians were persecuted for turning the world upside down. But 300 years after Jesus was executed by the Roman Empire, Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion of that very same empire.

Constantine was the first Christian nationalist. And ever since the powers that be have been taming Christianity, domesticating it, diluting it into something more palatable. Pro-war, pro-wealth, pro-white supremacy.

That original countercultural movement became tranquilized, privatized, weaponized religion, the official sponsor of Western Civilization. A religion of sharing became a religion of greed. A religion of peace became a religion of violence. A religion of forgiveness became a religion of judgment. A religion of ego transformation became a religion of ego affirmation.

Today, Christian nationalists obsess over people's

and on about forgiving debt, liberating the poor, and healing the sick.

Christian nationalists like to say this is a Christian nation. Not only is that historically inaccurate; not only is that theologically blasphemous, but it's also just not true. Look around us. If this was truly a Christian nation, we would forgive student debt. If this was truly a Christian nation, we would guarantee healthcare to every single person. If this was truly a Christian nation, we would love all of our LGBTQ neighbors. If this was truly a Christian nation, we would make sure every child in this state and in this country was housed, fed, clothed, educated and insured. If this was truly a Christian nation, we would never make it a Christian nation. Because we know the table of fellowship is open to everybody, including our Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and atheist neighbors.

Jesus could have started a Christian theocracy. But love would never do that. The closest thing we have to the Kingdom of Heaven is a multiracial, multicultural democracy where power is truly shared among all people, something that's yet to exist in human history.

Christian nationalism is not only a threat to the American experiment in democracy, it's also a threat

from it. No amount of church going or church missing can change it. That's, that's truly deserving of the title "Good News." We are made by love. With love. To love.

I call that love "God". You may use a different word, and that's okay. There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground. We can cure the disease of Christian nationalism. We can protect against the virus of religious extremism with healthy religion. The great faith traditions of the world have so much to offer us in this time of global crisis.

Hinduism's Ahimsa provides an alternative to the logic of violence. Buddhist meditation provides an alternative to the abuse of our attention. Judaism's Sabbath provides an alternative to the demands of capitalism. And in a world where everything can be bought and sold, including the Earth itself, Native American traditions provide an alternative to ecological extraction.

It's hard. It is so hard to protect your spirit in a world trying to kill it. That's why we need faith communities like this one. That's why we need stories and traditions and practices that heal our soul and transform our mind. Every time in this sanctuary that we say the prayers, sing the hymns,

Kingdom of God is in our midst. It's hiding in plain sight. Heaven is already here inside of us, above us, all around us.

On my mom's side, my granddad was a Baptist preacher, but on my dad's side, my Grandpa Talerico never went to church. But he was one of the most generous, compassionate, moral people I've ever met. He was an immigrant from Italy, whose family saw firsthand the dangers of mixing church and state. He settled in the Texas Hill Country and on Sunday mornings he would take these long walks through the wildflowers and live oaks, and he would take me with him. He said it was the best chance to see G.O.D.- The Great Outdoors.

Biologists tell us that everything in nature is connected and evolving toward greater union. Anthropologists tell us that our ability to share and cooperate is humanity's superpower. And astrophysicists tell us that the universe is just gentle enough to make our existence possible. This universe of ours is nothing but gratuitous grace. Teilhard wrote that the very physical universe is love. We see it in the harmonies of music, the principles of mathematics, the patterns of nature. We are all expressions of that creative power. We

The first is to love God. The second, he said, is to love it. Love thy neighbor as thyself. It's like it, because when I recognize the divine image in myself, I can't help but recognize it in my neighbor, whether they're Christian or not, whether they're religious or not.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus specifically defines neighbor as someone different from us. Racially, economically, politically, religiously. God loves diversity. God loves variety. Just look around this big, beautiful planet of ours. Do we really think God would make all these beautiful people with all their beautiful traditions for no reason at all?

There are so many pathways to the sacred. The Islamic mystic Rumi said every religion has love, but love has no religion. God is so much bigger than our human categories. God is not a Presbyterian. God is not a Christian. God is not a noun at all. God is a verb. God is not a Being. God is "being" itself. God is love. And that's why Jesus is against anything that gets in the way of that love between neighbors, including religion. That's why he's always breaking religious rules. That's why he's always getting in trouble with the religious authorities. That's why he says sinners will see the

Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't come to establish a Christian nation. He came to reveal ultimate reality, which he called the Kingdom of God. But it's not like any Kingdom we've ever known. Instead of a throne Jesus just sits at a table. Instead of a War Horse, Jesus rides a donkey. Instead of a sword, Jesus picks up the cross. The Kingdom of God inverts the power dynamics of all the kingdoms in the world.

True strength is vulnerability. True status is equality. True wealth is sharing. And we as Christians are called to realize that Kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven. Not by force but by faith. Jesus asked us to have the faith of a mustard seed, trusting that by living and dying for love, we give birth to a better world.

That's not easy to do. In a world full of fear, Jesus knew we would put our trust in something other than God, something other than love. As a Jewish rabbi, he called those things "idols" – money, status, and, the most dangerous idol of all, "power". When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, one of the things the devil offered was power - all the kingdoms of the world, and Jesus rejected it. When his disciples asked, "Who will be the most powerful in the Kingdom of God, Jesus said, "You know, the lords of the Earth push their people

asked, "Who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of God?" Jesus said, "little children." The least powerful, but most trusting members of any human community. That's the Kingdom of God. I think "Chance, the Rapper" said it best. "Don't believe in kings. Believe in the Kingdom".

Jesus knew, in the words of Dorothy Sola, there is only one legitimization of power, and that is to share it with others. Power that is not shared power, power that has not transformed into love, is pure domination and oppression. Christian nationalists are more committed to the love of power than to the power of love. And it exposes a lack of faith. Because the opposite of faith is not doubt. Doubt is a healthy part of any faith. The opposite of faith is control. When we stop trusting God, when we stop trusting love, we start taking control ourselves. Christian nationalists want to control what we read, who we marry, where we travel, when we have children. They want to control our minds and our bodies. Oh, ye of little faith!

Christian Nationalists trust domination because they think domination is what works. But Jesus revealed that the true power of the universe is not domination, but love. In Taoism, they teach that over time the soft overcomes the hard. The water