

Sunday, February 13, 2022

Sermon: "The Fat is in the Fire Now"

The United States has gone to war multiple time for reasons perhaps just and nefarious, but at least the issues on the table seemed serious. Then there was Korea, Vietnam, and an assortment of wars with murky reasons and presidential prevarications. We learned nothing in Vietnam and went to Afghanistan. We can debate endlessly about the reasons we are a warrior tribe, but what flabbergasts me is that we seem to be on the edge of a war about whether to mask or not to mask. A parent in Virginia, a mother of school children, threatened the school board with this remark: "I will bring every single gun loaded." Debate, argument, dissent – all of these I understand. State your case, but guns? Mothers want to bring guns to school? Guns? Are you serious? Have we lost our collective mind?

As a pastor, I have concerns that the idea of violence is growing as a viable option for people to get what they want, to have things their way. Road rage, airline passenger rage. Rage against police. Rage against protestors. Counter-protestors. An attack on our capitol, or a tour according to your eyesight. When the people I support, the people with causes I believe in, resort to violence, I must oppose the violence.

One word of cultural interpretation. There are rumors that truckers may try to blockade the Super Bowl. I'm not sure people want to get between Americans and their Super Bowl. This is a deeply religious experience, the holy day of the year, and there may be violence if truckers try to stop the Super Bowl.

Off-the-top of my head, here's a historical interpretation. We have raised two generations on the advertising profession's

constant diatribes: "Everything the government does is horrible, all politicians are corrupt, Washington is evil. And every commercial we see, from both sides, insist the other candidate is a bum, should be in jail, the other guy is a pervert. Well, why are we surprised that so many people now believe these exaggerated stereotypes of democracy and our elected officials? Each side has turned the other side into evil caricatures. I've been told that I worship a God of my own imagination. And I thought I worshiped Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I have been told that I am going to hell if I don't repent and believe in the rapture. If such a thing as the rapture does occur before the 2022 elections, do the math. There are 120,000,000 Americans – conservative, God-fearing, Jesus-loving, evangelical Christians who believe in the rapture and if it occurs, guess who wins total control of Congress? Rapture believers should be praying for the rapture to at least be postponed.

What does all this have to do with Jesus? I'm glad you asked me that question. What we are experiencing as a nation and as a church, calls Christians back to the words of Jesus. Back to the basics. Back to the meaning of the ministry of Jesus. We can't expect to make progress if we keep fighting each other over stuff that doesn't really have anything to do with the mission of Jesus.

Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Plain and his words are plain. Why then do we struggle with plain talk with Jesus? Why are we not saying, "Jesus says what he thinks, and I like that about him"? Instead, we are experts at saying, "Jesus didn't really mean what he said. Let me explain it to you." When we offer to "explain", we usually mean Jesus could not have meant what he plainly says.

What does Jesus say? "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you." We have the word

“mansplaining” for a man explaining something to a woman in a condescending or patronizing manner. Now, we should coin the word, “Jesusplaining” for preachers who explain what Jesus meant to say in a condescending, elitist manner. A prominent preacher said that Jesus didn’t intend for us to love our enemies that were other nations, but just those people in our church that we don’t like. That’s “Jesusplaining. I’m weary of people telling me what Jesus didn’t mean.

As a preacher, I dissent from the idea that you shouldn’t, from time to time, feel uncomfortable. “No pain; no gain.” I was trained to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. I’m still good with that instruction. My high school basketball coach believed in discipline. If you didn’t make the right play or pass or shot in practice, whistle blew, coach shouted, “Kennedy, run the bleachers 25 times. Our gym held 3,500 people and there were 40 huge steps from the bottom to the top. And that’s a lot of running. Coach was on me from the first day that he passed out the uniforms for those who made the team. He threw an old jersey at me - #6. “Kennedy, that was my jersey; don’t disgrace it or me.” I’m not confident that we would be willing to have a disciplined community of faith capable of sitting beneath the teaching of Jesus and allowing him to form us as a faithful and holy people. As soon as we started, someone would make a motion to change this or that and the fight would begin. We are not a disciplined people. Senator Patrick Moynihan, of the great state of New York once said: “I’m of a generation which I don’t think will be reproduced for a while” he said, “which is deeply respectful of American government and owes so much to it.” Discipline is lacking.

Let me give you an example that is having real impact on all of us right now as a bit of “Jesusplaining.” Here’s a basic truth: If some teaching of Jesus gives you trouble, there are preachers who will help you get off the hook. When Jesus says, “Woe are the rich,” and “Give all your money to the poor,” there are preachers to

help you ignore those teachings. After all, preacher salaries depend on rich contributors. When Jesus says that he will judge the nations, and you don't want Jesus having anything to do with politics, there are preachers who will help you ignore the plain teaching of Jesus. Some preachers neatly divide the kingdom of God into the individual and the national. This is known as the "Two Kingdom" Theory. They insist that the plain teaching of Jesus doesn't apply to nations, to governments, but only to individuals.

Some evangelical preachers are now telling us that the government only exists to defend us from evil, but they have twisted Augustine and Luther so that they sound more like the extreme version of Calvinism that permeated everyday life in Puritan New England. Robert Jeffress, FBC Dallas, Texas says on Fox News that the government's sole purpose is to protect us, and this had led him to insist that gay marriage should be outlawed (the next evangelical target after Roe vs. Wade).

Jeffress: "Look, the godly principle here is that governments have one responsibility, and that is Romans 13 [which] says to avenge evil-doers. God gives governments the power of the sword, of capital punishment, of executing wrongdoers." Jeffress is big on pointing out the evildoers, the wrongdoers. This is a category mistake. Kenneth Burke taught me that "the progress of human enlightenment can go no further than in picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken." Once we consider everyone on the other side "evil," we have lost the church and democracy.

I am not willing to allow the "Two-Kingdom" idea to be the only idea on the theological dance floor. This idea that God is not involved in nations and governments is a scary view of the role of the government. It is also unbiblical, dangerous, and misleading. Jesus says the nations will be judged by how well they provided for people. There is a single principle behind this teaching of Jesus: Empathy. When we take empathy and add the

responsibility and willingness to act on that empathy, we have the purpose of government (George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*).

Let's overlay Luke with Matthew 25 where Jesus says "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him" (Matthew 25: 31-32). Jesus will interrogate the nations, and the nation's leaders and there will be no lying, no twisting of words, no media prejudices. There will be no "alternative truth." There will be no gaslighting. There will be no name-calling, scoffing, or mocking. There will be no political misleading. There will be no conspiracy theories. There will be no propaganda. Plain truth. Light of day truth. Truth, nothing but the truth. Truth, so help me God truth. Jesus, bringing the truth, "shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate" (Isaiah 52:15). Did the nation feed the hungry and if so, how well? Did the nation care for the poor? The thirsty? The stranger? The naked? The sick? The prisoners? Did you love your enemies? Did you forgive? Did you treat all persons with dignity and give them value and space and place? This is not "Judge Judy" putting on a show; this is King Jesus bringing the truth at last.

I have little confidence that we are paying attention to the words of Jesus. There's a word for us. Norman Fischer, in his translation of Psalm 1:6 uses the word "heedless" instead of wicked. We have become a "heedless" people. I believe "heedless" is exactly the right word for many in our nation. I looked up the definition: "Showing a reckless lack of care or attention, paying no heed to, inattentive, and oblivious to." We are like a guy driving 110 mph on I-890 because he's late for dinner. Heedless. We are like the 3rd guy in the line who runs the red light because he can. Heedless. We are like the lady who took a private jet to D. C. on January 6 and wandered into the Capital with the crowd. Heedless, but now she's doing 10 months to four years in federal

prison. A protestor throws a rock through a store window. Heedless. The heedless are thrown about by every wind of emotion, rumor, and conspiracy, the mistrust of the government, the whims and fads of the moment. I am convinced that our violence is related to becoming a "heedless" people.

The antonyms of heedless are attentive and thoughtful. The Bible even has antonyms for heedless: ponder and discern. Let us be attentive to the words of Jesus. Let us ponder and discern what Jesus wants us to do. The fat is in the fire now, here and now. What Jesus says really is supposed to go. I think we should do what Jesus says. I had a post on Facebook and someone responded: "What he said." That's to be our response to Jesus.

Love your enemies.
Turn the other cheek.
Don't worry, ask God for what you need.
Deny, take up cross, and follow Jesus.
Rejoice when persecuted
Call no one a fool.
Suffer for righteousness.
Forgive everyone.
Do not resist an evildoer.
Fast as a regular discipline.
Do not judge.
Do to others as you would have them do to you.

We can't afford to be heedless in these difficult days. There are not two kingdoms. Governments do not get a "Get out of Jail Free" card. This is the plain Word that comes from Jesus – the speaker of plain truth. You can take him at his Word and live the way he says live. This is the way!