

Sermon Given by Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

June 13, 2021-Pride Worship Sunday

Third Sunday after Pentecost

"America Needs a Pastor"

I Samuel 15:34 – 16:13

## **AMERICA NEEDS A PASTOR**

### **I Kings 3 and other selected passages from I Kings**

#### TRUTH AND POWER

Tragedy covers our story. God has "rejected Saul from being king." When God deposes a king, sit up and look out. Thank God the USA has never wanted or had a king. Well, we had a king once, a king named George, but we couldn't keep him. He had strange ideas about our freedom. While we seem to go "gaga" over British royalty, we don't wish for Elizabeth to be our queen. And in our story, we read, "And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel."

The biblical writers are telling the story in a very bold way – by telling the story from the human point of view, as if God had feelings just like mixed-up, angry, jealous, insecure humans (Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*). God is not capricious, hot-tempered, mercurial. God is not a politician. Ascribing human feelings to God is a way of saying that Saul had been a really bad king, that God's covenant has been violated. Saul was impetuous, jealous, hot-tempered, and unfaithful. Yet the words have such a ring of finality: "God was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel." I don't know about you, but I would like to know when God is "sorry."

We don't need a king, and thank the Lord we term-limit our presidents, but there are times when God sends a preacher to a nation. Harry Emerson Fosdick, Gardner Taylor, Martin Luther King Jr., Billy Graham William Sloane Coffin, James Forbes, and Jeremiah Wright have all been preachers to the nation. The times

we inhabit require a pastor to the nation – a called by God and sent-to-the-nation preacher.

Put a “HELP WANTED” ad in *The Christian Century*. Select a search committee. Find us a pastor. Put down that we want the pastor to speak truth to power. Power cannot be allowed to run wild without the supervision of truth. In the Bible there are tales of power – abusive, oppressive, awful power – the power of the empire. The list of bad kings, one after another tumbling out of the royal barrel, seems unending. There wasn’t a bad apple in the royal barrel; there was a barrel full of bad apples. From Ahab to Zimri the history of God’s kings resounds with the judgment: “Did not do what was good in the sight of the Lord.” Back when the people demanded a king, God said to Samuel, “They have rejected me from being king over them.” Note that in our story God says, “I have rejected [Saul] from being king.”

The church has often cast her lot with the official purveyors of power. It is an ugly scene when the church cuddles up to the politicians and the halls of Congress are filled with creatures – half-preacher and half-politician. I’m saying that America needs a pastor to contest the aggregation of power that has lined up like mega-hogs at the trough. One of my jobs as a boy was to feed the hogs. We had this huge boar hog that would not allow any of the other hogs to eat any of the corn. He would drive them all away and then eat it all. I had to put him in a separate pen with his feed and then allow the other hogs to have their share of the corn from another trough. The boar hog knew what I had done, and he was “rare’ up on the planks of his pen and make god-awful noises of violence and try to break out of the enclosure. He didn’t want to share the food. That’s what we have today – a farm full of old boar hogs unwilling to share the goods.

Today, on Pride Sunday, at EFC, I speak directly to the power that has for centuries been arranged in ways that have been hurtful, harmful, and heinous for gays, lesbians, trans-gender, and bi-sexual persons as well as women and minorities. Lives have been wrecked; love has been denied; families have been

fractured; denominations have been torn asunder all because some Christians read the book of Leviticus badly.

The church has a history of using guilt and shame to badger, belittle, and control people. No understanding of the church is possible without an understanding of the dynamics of shame. Shame is a power tool, a power move. To shame is to exert power over others – to put them down. Gays have been shamed with unrelenting force and devastating consequences. Finally, gay marriage became a reality. In the long struggle, the PCUSA, the UCC, the ELCA, and the Episcopal churches suffered painful splits. The movement for gay rights celebrates a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this month. 50 years after Stonewall, New York, LGBTQ rights are still a work in progress.

That is why we still have Pride Sunday as a rally point against the relentless campaign of the anti-gay groups that are mostly evangelical Christians, good church-going folk who want to overturn gay marriage and make America colder, more judgmental, more exclusive, and less diverse again. After all, the “good folk” have anti-gay Sunday 52 times a year. The shame falling from evangelical pulpits looks like a snowstorm in Schenectady in January.

Look, God was never pleased with or supportive of the way power was used to abuse and demean and hurt and destroy others. The church has been a slow learner of God’s ethics. Our ethics need to catch up to God. After all, when God says, ‘For my **thoughts** are not your **thoughts**, nor are your ways my ways,’ has it crossed your mind that our old thoughts about gays, women, minorities, may be rooted in rebellion against God’s thoughts?

Shame, Tomkins writes, “is felt as a sickness of the soul which leaves man naked, defeated, alienated, and lacking in dignity” (*Shame and Its Sisters: A Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank). Shame is experienced as constant companion. Where can we go from the power of shame? Or where can we flee from its presence? If we make our beds in

Sheol, shame is there. If we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the seas; even there shame touches and scars our hearts. Shame, in all its nastiness, sticks to human bodies. Wherever we go, there are people that will slather shame on bodies like fleas on a blue-tick hound dog from Georgia.

Christians have often been the purveyors of harm. "The rolling of the eyes," "the clucking of the tongues," "the nasty whispers behind the backs" – all part of bodily movements of shaming others. In an episode of *Dr. Blake*, a British mystery, his housekeeper, Jeanne, is waiting to receive communion. Three or four women stare at her with that self-satisfied glare of judgment and disgust. Dr. Blake and Jeanne are going to be married after his divorce is final, and this is 1950ish and there's a severe shame associated with divorce. The camera captures Jeanne, head bowed, shoulders slumped, as she eases out of the church, away from the sacrament of communion – shamed by the looks of a group of "Old biddies." Shame and guilt share "the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation." (Silvan S. Tomkins). The cruelty of the shamers has been called the "hedonicity of hate." Not just hate but an enjoyment of hate and cruelty and torture.

Sweep out the shame! Our churches now have women pastors and gay pastors, and God has blessed these ministries and these churches. Gays are leaders in many areas of education, business, and politics. News flash: They always have been but not publicly. King James, yes, the King James Bible king, was gay. The closet has been locked and the key has been thrown away. God's house, a house not made with hands, has no closets. There are windows everywhere and doors galore, but no closets. No hidden torture chambers. No punishment rooms. The word "closet" doesn't even appear in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

If there is going to be shame, then let the church allow the shame to pour over us like the oil dripping down Aaron's beard, let the church bear the shame like a beast of burden in the heat of the day, let the church own the shame that was never ordained

of God, let the church surrender shame for dignity of all persons. Let us own the sins of our ancestors, the atrocities of our nation, our many flaws and manifold wickedness. Let us be the ones who cry out that we are sinners, that none doeth good, that we are altogether unclean. Let us declare that we are people of unclean lips and ask God to forgive us so that we might be more sensitive, more thoughtful, more compassionate, more moral, more ethical.

The nation needs a pastor to speak to the pain and hurt of the voiceless and powerless. The nation needs a pastor to speak for the ones who keep crying out and are not heard or recognized. The nation needs a pastor that will clearly pronounce that God has never ordained the church's campaigns of cruelty, hatred, exclusion, and discrimination. And not just one pastor, but thousands of faithful pastors across the land proclaiming the mercy, grace, and love of God.

I appeal to one of the most basic beliefs that we have about God: God never changes. Well, this means God has always opposed our abuse of others. God is not the author of shame and guilt and pain and hurt and abuse. God has always been against the mistreatment of women, gays, and minorities. Just because God's church got everything "back-ass-wards", doesn't mean we should blame God. Whenever sorriness is involved, it is in us, not in God.

God was against the persecution and discrimination of gays at the dawn of the universe, and God, who does not change, is still against it today. Today on Pride Sunday we raise our voice to assure the nation that we will not allow the return of the old injustices. May a sense of pride and dignity replace all the dirty, rotten, pathetic, immoral, awful shame. Amen!