

September 18, 2022

Sermon Given by Rev. Kennedy

When We Are Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Amos 8:4 – 7

I Timothy 2:1 - 7

Luke 16:1 – 13

The churches in America are between a rock and a hard place. A pastor had a hard conversation with a couple in his church. They accused him of being politically neutral, taking the easy way out and trying to make everyone happy. The pastor said, "The harder thing is to do what I'm doing. It cheapens the Gospel if we pick a tribe, raise the flag, and be very loud about it. That is so easy to do." The couple later said the pastor's conservatism had no teeth. What's a preacher to do? Say nothing? Join the political fray? What's the next move when caught between a rock and a hard place?

People are fired up, angry, resentful, scared. A man from North Mississippi called our church last week and left a seven-minute rant. He was really angry about something I had written for Baptist Global News. And he felt obligated to call Emmanuel Friedens from Starkville, Mississippi and tell me that I was not a Christian. I was not a Baptist. And that our church was not a real church; we were a social club, the YMCA. I had a church once located next door to the YMCA, but this is the first time anyone ever called my church the YMCA. The man was really angry. Let's pray for him. God bless him.

In the Gospel story, Jesus offers an "unsettling narrative of a shrewd operator who ingratiates himself with the master's debtors by settling their accounts at dramatic discounts. In the surprise punchline, the master commends the shrewd operator for his savvy dealings. This is not business as usual. Jesus commends the ways of dishonest business people to his followers. Strange right?

This is a story about being caught between a rock and a hard place. "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. Maybe the rich man had squandered the money with too many parties, cruises, expensive gifts, and toys. We may have been raised by people who "squirreled" away the bucks, but we now inhabit a nation that squanders God's gifts, our natural resources, our own wealth. America has become a squandering, squawking, squirrely bunch.

The story offends our notions that people ought to get what's coming to them. People should not have their debts reduced. How many of you were upset when college loans received a \$10,000 reduction? How many of you are unhappy with the prodigal son getting a party? How many of you were excited that immigrants were sent to Cape Cod? There's something deep in the American psyche about fairness and about people getting what they deserve. You can feel as deeply as you wish about these issues, but it's not the gospel. Jesus forces us to change our lives in response to the gospel. We are between a rock and a hard place with our common sense and the gospel. We are between a rock and a hard place with our politics and the gospel. We are between a rock and a hard place with God and money.

At some point there is a reckoning with how we have handled our stewardship. We can't serve two masters. One day we have to choose, but we are reluctant. I think that is the current state of Christianity. We are attempting to serve two masters and we are not doing well.

I think about Amos, a preacher caught between a rock and a hard place. He has a big heart for the poor and the oppressed. He has such passion for his preaching. Sample a bit of Amos preaching the word:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, 'When will the new moon be over
so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath,
so that we may offer wheat for sale?

But one day, the preaching of Amos landed him between a rock and a hard place. His preaching offended the king, offended the king's court preacher, Amaziah. You can't advocate for the poor without offending the potentate.

"Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has been talking trash about the king.'" Amaziah dismissed Amos saying, "You shall never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." That's always an option – get rid of the preacher if you don't like his message.

Do you get it? This was supposed to be the house of God, but it had become a sanctuary of the king, supposed to be God's Temple, but now a temple of the king. Politics poisoned the house of God. Politics of fear, greed, and lies put out the fire in God's house. History repeats itself. Jesus gave God's House a cleaning one day. He chased the moneychangers out of God's

house. "This is a house of prayer and you have made it a house of thieves and robbers." Now, God's house is overrun by false prophets, preaching prosperity, riches, success, health, and positive thinking. Whose house is it? God's house? Whose house is it? God's house.

The church is caught between the rock of the Gospel and the hard place of secular politics. When our focus is not Jesus – his teachings, his actions, his life, death, and resurrection – we have taken a wrong road. The hard place of politics has beaten down the doors of too many churches.

You probably don't know this but there are always Amaziah's in the church – people with power and status who like to intimidate preachers and staff and control everything. They are religious bullies with a smile and a handshake, but they can't be trusted. There's always someone who wants to bully you. I have a built-in disaffection for all bullies. A leader in a church I served would come to my office and stand over my desk, in a black suit and a scowl on his face and lecture me about what I was supposed to do. The first time he pulled that stunt, I remained in my desk and listened to him. The next time he came into my office unannounced, I got up, walked around my desk, and stood next to him. I was taller than him and I wasn't going to be intimidated by a bully, not even a Baptist deacon bully.

I think the historical agreement between people and preacher is in shambles. Now, people are no longer willing to hear the words of God from the preacher. "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but having their **ears** tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." We figure the preacher doesn't have the expertise to tell us much of anything unless it's Joseph's Egyptian name or what happened to the Jebusites.

I think I understand what is happening. You listen to me for about 30 minutes a week. The rest of the week you have a horde of opinionators, alternative-truth tellers, liars, wackos, television and radio pundits, filling your head with conspiracy theories.

When I feel like I'm between a rock and a hard place, I do several things to counteract my feelings. I pray. I read Scripture. I make sure I'm standing on the rock so I can take on "the hard place".

In our New Testament epistle lesson, Paul makes clear that we have a message and he puts it in credal language: For there is one God. I must preach that. There is one mediator – Christ Jesus, himself human. I must preach that. Jesus gave himself a ransom for all. I must preach that. For this

I was called to be a herald, a preacher, a teacher in faith and truth. I am not between a rock and a hard place. I am standing on the solid ground of my calling.

I think preachers and congregations should have an annual review of expectations and understandings, a review of the vows of ordination to make sure we are not putting each other between a rock and a hard place. As you move toward calling a new senior pastor, I think this is the best way forward. Let's check out what it is that a pastor is supposed to do:

In my ordination vows, I promised to be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church has received them. I also promised to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ by word and deed, to love and serve the people, and to care for them all. I stood before God and witnesses and promised to declare God's forgiveness, God's blessing, God's judgment, even God's rebuke, to share the sacraments with everyone, to nourish God's people and strengthen them for this life and the life to come. I also promised to be diligent in the reading and study of God's Word and to do the kind of reading and study that would make me wiser and stronger so that my study would be a gift to you, and I would never phone the sermon in by babbling a few words unprepared on Sunday. I promised to pray for you without ceasing. Those are my vows and I accept them every morning.

Look, we are standing on the rock that is Jesus and we are his people. Preach the gospel. Allow the preacher to speak the tough words of the gospel. The more of Jesus we share, the more of Jesus we can share with the world.

We are not between a rock and a hard place. We are free to love and serve God!