

Sermon – For Us...and For All –

October 2, 2022 (World Communion)

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³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.



For these last couple of weeks, and for a few more to come we have been talking about “How to Change the World.”

Each week I’ve said, as a disclaimer, that I’m no special expert on this subject – except as far as that is part of my training as a pastor. I’ve been leaving that part out. One of the priorities for Disciples of Christ ministers is to address the brokenness of the world so that we can be what we say we are, “A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.”

So, I have spent a lot of time studying and practicing this priority – actually addressing social problems. It’s something that my seminary training focused on, even. And social problems includes ideas that become problems in society. Because actions do the actual harm, but an action always comes from an idea, right?

Sometimes that idea is very instinctual. Imagine I’m being attacked by a swarm of bees. Well, an idea jumps into my head, right?

“Run!!!”

And so I run. But because I'm just reacting to pain and fear instinctually and the more reasonable part of my brain is sort of muted, I run into traffic.

Well...that's still a problem.

The same thing happens to all of us on a daily basis. And sometimes those ideas we have are almost instinctual, so deeply embedded that we don't even notice them. Sometimes those ideas come from our family, specifically. Other times they come from our culture. And, of course, that overlaps.

But our ideas can become harmful when we act on them.

For the first couple Sundays of this series we have used slavery as an example of how Christians have addressed a social problem and made a positive change.

Now, if you read my email this week, I mentioned that we'd talk about World Communion Sunday – because this is, as I told the kids, World Communion Sunday, and how slavery was justified using the Bible, but also that we'd address a current problem called Christian Nationalism.

Well, sometimes, I haven't gotten to editing my sermon ideas down enough by Friday when I try and send that email.

My wife, April, is an English teacher and a really good editor, and so sometimes I'll give her a draft of my sermon. And I remember her saying, I think it's more than once, something like, "This is good, Tim. But which of these three sermons do you want to preach?"

So, this Sunday, we're going to put a pin in the conversation about the history of slavery – how Christians both justified it and helped abolish it. I'm pushing that on to next week.

This week, instead, I'm joining with other clergy across the country to address the really relevant topic of Christian Nationalism. This Sunday I'm taking part in this event – where I got that beautiful image of a communion table. And the folks who organized this group chose this Sunday, World Communion Sunday, on purpose.

The other thing I want to be really clear about – because the term Christian Nationalism has been thrown about so much in recent months – is that Christian Nationalism does not equal being conservative or being a Republican. Some very progressive people have started just labeling anyone who disagrees with them as a Christian Nationalist. It's lazy and it's not helpful and it's not true.

No matter who you voted for in recent elections or plan on voting for this year and going forward, that doesn't make you a Christian Nationalist. So, I just want to be clear there.

But we want to be aware of this problem, this very harmful idea that is spreading in our nation, and specifically among our fellow Christians, so we can be aware as we make our own choices politically.

It's really important that I don't speak about partisan politics from the pulpit. I'm never going to tell you who to vote for. And I will affirm that people with good hearts, people who are genuine disciples of Jesus Christ, will vote in opposing ways in any election. We are all trying to do the best we can, none of us understands everything perfectly. We all have different priorities.

But I'm going to say this today very clearly: as followers of Jesus Christ, we have to resist Christian Nationalism. There is no room for this idea in the church.

OK. Let's pivot for a second.

Why are we talking about this topic on World Communion Sunday?

The scripture for today shows us an ideal image of Christian community. And twice in this brief passage, it mentions breaking bread. In verse 41 it says this growing community of Jesus followers "devoted themselves to breaking bread" and then in verse 46 it says that "day by day...they broke bread at home with glad and generous hearts."

I want to give you a moment to read those two scriptures again...Ok next slide.

The other important image in this passage is the mass baptism. 3,000 people, it says, were baptized after hearing Peter's words.

And baptism and the table are the two sacraments of the church. Some churches don't call them sacraments – we have as Disciples of Christ used that term. But even churches that don't use that term, still acknowledge these two rituals as central to our faith – and that they are deeply connected in some way.

We are made new in the waters of baptism – given new life. And that same new life is sustained at the table.

But both baptism and the table are signs of our unity in Christ with Christians everywhere.

And, for many of us, they point to the truth that all people are children of God – whether they are Christian or not.

So, World Communion Sunday is the perfect time to speak up about the cancer of Christian Nationalism that is spreading through the body of our nation.

So, what is Christian Nationalism?

Let me say, first, that we aren't going to go deeply into this topic – there just isn't time. I'm laying groundwork today and being very clear today, but I intend to bring this topic back up as it relates to future sermons.

I'll also share resources in the coming weeks and months – and, God help us, years. Because it doesn't seem like this movement, this ideology, is going away.

But what is it?

Well, it isn't just an American phenomenon. The invasion of Ukraine is actually fueled by Christian Nationalist ideas. In fact, there are other forms of religious nationalism. Hindu

Nationalism. Islamic Nationalism. Buddhist Nationalism. They are sometimes defined differently, but there are common elements we can see – that are becoming clear.

And so it kind of shows that the things that Christian Nationalists claim to be inherent to the Gospel, are actually very human, very worldly.

Rebecca Littlejohn, who helped create this event and has been gathering resources on this topic for a couple years, says this: “Christian Nationalism is a distortion of Christianity used to disguise an extremist political ideology that seeks to exercise power over others by means both coercive and violent.” – Rebecca Littlejohn, Disciples Pastor

It seeks to exercise power over others by both coercion and violence.

That is antithetical to the ethics of Jesus.

Violence happens in our world. Sometimes Christians make the choice to be soldiers or police officers or to defend themselves. All of those choices are part of the broad Christian tradition.

But using violence to control others and gain power is never aligned with the Gospel.

Andrew Whitehead, in a Tim Magazine article, lists three threats Christian Nationalism poses to America:

1) Christian Nationalism is anti-democratic, 2) Christian Nationalism perpetuates racism, 3) Christian Nationalism approves of political violence.

Christian Nationalists have said, straight up, that they do not think democracy is the right way to govern a country. They believe that power should rest with “Christians” – but of course they define Christian very narrowly.

They would not see our church as Christian – or at least they’d say we’ve gone astray from the truth.

And, honestly, I’m nervous about preaching this sermon – but we have to tell the truth. We have to stand up for what is right.

Because we’ve seen this movie before, and things can and will get worse. We have to stand up and say these things *now*.

Christian Nationalism also tends to have a lot of racist undertones – and, frankly, overtones.

And, again, as Littlejohn highlighted, they believe it is OK – and even admirable – to gain political power through violence.

Another Christian leader many of us admire, Pope Francis, said this in regards to Christian Nationalism – again, which is a worldwide phenomenon: “May we never justify violence. May we never allow the sacred to be exploited by the profane. The sacred must never be a prop for power, nor power a prop for the sacred!”

The Gospel of Jesus Christ resists violence as a means to an end. Jesus rejected that route to power at every step along the way.

His body was broken. His body was broken because he did not choose to respond in violence.

And His Gospel also resists the chopping up of humanity into different groups.

Christ lived and died and rose again from death to save the whole world.

So, the gospel always has to be for everyone. And it has to be clear that the good of all people is our first priority.

Does that mean we can't love our country? No.

Nationalism is very different from patriotism.

We are, in fact, supposed to pray for our country, support our country, and work for the good of our country. The scriptures tell us that.

But we are not supposed to equate our nation with God.

We are not supposed to wrap the Bible or God or Jesus up in the flag. And we see that happening.

And that is called idolatry.

It's when something else becomes a stand-in for God.

We cannot let that happen. Even though we all fall victim to it from time to time.

It happens to all of us.

And, yes, more progressive folks who say people who disagree with them aren't "real Christians" are also wrong in chopping up the world like that.

But when it reaches the level it has recently with one particular idea – then we really need to talk about it. We have to stand up and speak up. We have to tell the truth.

God does not love our country more than others.

God does not love Christians more than others.

God does not want Christians to exercise power and control over others on God's behalf.

God shows us the example of humility and service and compassion for others in the person of Jesus.

We are supposed to soak that in every time we come to the table.

That is the Gospel. That God heals the world, makes it whole.

God does not chop up the world and ask us to force others to do our will.

We are supposed to be yeast. We are supposed to be light. We are supposed to be salt. We flavor the world with the love of Christ.

Like the Christians in Acts, who had everyone's goodwill because they practiced welcome instead of exclusion – peace instead of violent power.

That is our model. And it is completely different from Christian Nationalism.

Our call is to speak the truth. To be the light. To be examples of Jesus' love in the world.

We have to do that if we are going to claim to be his disciples. Amen.

