

## **“You Will Know Them By Their Fruit”**

Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 7:15-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Christianity & Democracy Series, Part III

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be so rooted in your love  
that we can clearly recognize all that grows from other trees. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Yikes! “Go away from me, you evildoers.” The verses we just read from Matthew 7 are some of the harshest words the gospels put into the mouth of Jesus. So it’s probably important to notice who he’s talking to. It turns out that our natural impulse to brand hypocrisy a graver sin than most others has a source; that’s exactly what Jesus is doing here. You don’t get to claim my name and use it for purposes contrary to the gospel, he says. Just because you slap a Jesus label on the front, that doesn’t mean it has my stamp of approval. Get outta here with that garbage.

All of which means that those of us who are out here trying to celebrate the unity of the church universal have a harder job than we might otherwise. Because apparently, we can’t just commune with everyone who’s throwing around the word “Christian.” We have to see the fruit and determine whether it aligns with the will of God or not. That is how, Jesus says, we will know whether someone is following him or barking up some other tree.

As we come together today, with Christians around the world, to celebrate World Communion Sunday, we are joining with churches across this country to

examine and ward off the fruits of Christian Nationalism, a growing threat to faith and democracy in our nation. When we're trying to weigh the consequences and nature of something, it's helpful to have an example of what's right and what's wrong. What does Christian faith look like? And what does it not look like? Our scripture lessons provide both of these examples for us today, the positive and the negative. So let's take a closer look there before we turn to the dangers we're facing in the current moment.

The passage we heard from the second chapter of Philippians contains what scholars call the "kenosis hymn." If you were following along in your Bible like Jerry always wants you to, you saw that along about verse 6, the lines shifted into poetic form, rather than a simple paragraph. The assumption here is that Paul was quoting a hymn widely used in the early church, which means that these words are even older than the letter he was sending to Philippi from prison. That's where the hymn part comes from. But what about "kenosis"? The word is a Greek word that means "emptying" or "self-emptying". To call this passage the "kenosis hymn" is to recognize that the line about Christ emptying himself rather than exploiting his equality with God is the most important part. And indeed, one could argue that Christ's emptying himself is precisely what we celebrate when we gather at the communion table. It is the culmination of God taking on flesh: the humble

willingness to accept the destiny of flesh, that is, bodily death. But as with much of the Christian story, there are far too many people who want to skip to the end.

The end of this kenosis hymn moves past the emptied nature of Christ. We read of exaltation and everything in creation bowing and giving glory. Why shouldn't we want to get to that part quickly? It sounds a lot more pleasant. But did you hear what Paul said about these two steps. He introduced the hymn by saying "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." And the hymn says that Christ Jesus emptied and humbled himself. The second part isn't about Jesus; it's about what God did. Paul is not suggesting that we should try to be like God, as if that would be possible. Jesus, the Divine in human form, is our example, not God, whose mysteries we will never comprehend. We do not get to skip to the end, for the End is in God's hands. So the fruits this passage exhorts us to pursue are things like encouragement, consolation, compassion, humility, and joy, not exaltation or dominion or glory.

The negative example we're given in Matthew 7 isn't so much a specific list, as a reminder that there are ways to do Christianity wrong. It reminds us the prophesy and deeds of power are neutral as concepts on their own. What matters are the content of the prophesies and the consequences of the deeds of power. Are the fruits of these actions aligned with God's will or not? Because if they are not, doing them in Jesus' name will not make them holy. Indeed, Jesus' harsh words for those who try this kind of dishonest whitewashing imply that it's a more egregious violation

of the gospel than simple straightforward greed or violence. There are other places that list for us what the fruits of the gospel are, however. In Luke 4, Jesus tells us he came to bring good news to the poor and oppressed, to release the captives and restore sight to the blind. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells stories of the righteous feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison and caring for the sick. God has told us, O mortals, what is good; we are called to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. It ought not to be that hard to recognize such fruit. It seems what might harder is screwing up our courage to call out those who are using Jesus' name for agendas that bear very different fruit.

But we must. On this day when we celebrate our unity with Christians around the globe, we must denounce those who would say Americans are the best Christians and those from other countries are inferior. On this day when we celebrate the humble sacrifice that made our broken world whole, we must denounce rhetoric that aims to make Christianity about violent pursuit of power over others. Though our love of unity may make us reluctant to judge "fellow" Christians, in these fraught times, we do well to heed the writings of Word & Way writers Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood when they clarify that Christian Nationalism should have two capital letters, because it is, in fact, a whole other religion, one that does not have Christ at its center.

So what is Christian Nationalism? It is a power-seeking ideology that aims to fuse a narrow definition of Christianity with an even narrower definition of who qualifies as an American. It uses a revisionist understanding of American history to privilege a certain type of Christian over all other citizens and residents, with the aim of putting Christians in charge, with dominion over everyone else, by whatever means necessary, including methods both anti-democratic and violent. Christian Nationalism hijacks the language and imagery of traditional Christianity of many stripes to provide cover for political aims that are distinctly anti-Christian. That is to say, the fruits of Christian Nationalism do not come from the tree of Jesus' love.

To be clear, as I use these metaphors, it is important to clarify that I would consider the trees in this situation to be the ideologies and the fruit to be the consequences of the ideology being played out. None of the people espousing Christian Nationalism are beyond the reach of God's love, and we must continue to help them find their way back. But we cannot do that at the expense of the gospel being maligned and abused by this violent and extremist agenda. The victims of Christian Nationalism, whether immigrants, LGBTQ friends, people of color, or differently abled neighbors, must take priority, for their protection and nurture is where God's heart leans. To follow Jesus' example in our current moment is to offer ourselves in humble service and sacrificial love to the vulnerable and marginalized. Jesus is not a Messiah of violent triumph, forcibly compelling obedience and

obeisance. That is not the “same mind” Paul is asking us to imitate. God has told, my friends, what is good and what our role is in bringing about that good.

It is important to note the difference between nationalism and patriotism. We can debate the role of patriotism in a Christian’s life for hours. But the salient point today is that nationalism and patriotism are not the same thing. Patriotism calls us to love our country and promote the ideals of equality and liberty upon which it is founded. Nationalism is about invoking hierarchies of some over others, usually through violent means. Again, we can look to the fruits of each mind-set. Patriotism calls for respect for our leaders. Nationalism, ironically, looks beyond our borders and idolizes autocratic leaders like Victor Orban of Hungary, because of his willingness to defy democratic norms to impose his agenda.

Is the call to denounce Christian Nationalism an invitation to the church to meddle in politics? I would argue that Christian Nationalism brought politics to the church. We must respond because this extremist ideology is hijacking our faith tradition, for purposes that are clearly outside the will of God. “You will know them by their fruit,” Jesus said. If we’re going to recognize the fruit, we have to pay attention. When the fruit is violence and repression and hateful, dishonest rhetoric that increases misunderstanding and fear, we must stand up and declare that this is not the gospel. This is not good news. This is not the word or way of Jesus Christ.

These prophets are false, ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing as Jesus called them. We cannot let them prevail.

Rather we must live and share the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself rather than exploiting the power of God. We must loudly and clearly proclaim the gospel of God's love and mercy, freely offered to all. We must embrace our siblings all around the world, united as we are in the Body of Christ. We must bear good fruit, so that the people of God may be fed and flourish. Hallelujah and Amen.