

The Fear Question

LUKE 22:25-27 (NRSV) *But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*

As I see it, the greatest danger to Christianity today is a church that is a house divided, with no visible effort or willingness to reconcile the divisions. Christianity is locked into rigid absolutism in which multiple factions declare, “We’re the only ones right, and unity is not possible until everybody agrees with us.”

And until Christianity gets its act together, Christianity may be the greatest danger to human civilization. I guess I’ve been avoiding the elephant in the room: White Christian Nationalism.

Don’t hear me wrong: I’m not referring to any level of patriotism

I’m a combat veteran. I stand with my hand over my heart when the flag passes by and when the national anthem is played (but don’t assume I condemn those whose conscience leads them to respond differently). I vote in every election; I’ve held public office; and I write frequently to our Congressional and Senatorial representatives. I think I know something about patriotism, and White Christian Nationalism is not patriotism. It is ethnic extremist Christian-ism.

White Christian Nationalists see the nation as historically and theologically theirs; so any Presidential election or legislative or judicial action that doesn’t produce the desired result must be illegitimate. True patriots, in their thinking, have the right—the duty, even—to take their country back, by force if necessary.

The insurrection at our nation’s Capitol on January 6 was a contradictory mix of toxic Christianity and violent masculinity, symbolized by American flags and Christian flags, Bible quotes, crosses on T-shirts, “Jesus Saves” signs, prayers for victory, and weapons. Participants believed they were waging a Holy War that justified the use of any means necessary.”¹

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention wrote to his fellow evangelicals about the breach of the Capitol and said, “If you can defend this, you can defend anything.”

Now, you have every right to agree or not. There’s plenty of animosity to go around, and there is an emerging culture of rage that is becoming, even in church, the core of human interaction in these times of upheaval and transition.

Taking a moment to recall where we are in this series of sermons inspired by Jim Wallis’ book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*, I find in Wallis a kindred spirit who struggles, as I do, over a faith that more closely reflects regional politics than the one we are called to follow. Says Wallis, “We have become

¹ Katharine Rhodes Henderson, President, Auburn Seminary, quoted in Notes from the Field – in an email letter from Auburn Seminary, 8.24.2021

disconnected from Jesus. We're not standing and acting in his name, with his values, action, and inspiration," (p. 10) (and I would add, instead, we too often attempt to push Jesus into the molds of our already existing political biases and religious doctrines.) We need to reclaim Jesus as our only standard.

Wallis offers eight questions—eight teachings of Jesus—by which we can discern whether we truly are reclaiming Jesus.

First: **"The Image Question:"** in a world obsessed with image, Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God in whose image all humanity is created, and Jesus rebukes any claim to superiority by any human group over any another.² To do so is a brutal attack on the image of God.

Next: **"The Neighbor Question:"** in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus expands the concept of neighbor to include those who are different from us—even those we hate.

Last week we looked at **"The Truth Question:"** When the number of official lies reaches the point that people question whether truth is even possible, Jesus says, "I am the truth." What does truth look like? Just observe Jesus' life.

And so, we come today to **"The Power Question."** Matthew's gospel says the mother of James and John—those "Sons of Thunder"—asks Jesus if her sons can sit at his right and his left when he becomes king... sort of equivalent of being vice president and secretary of state.

The other disciples overheard and were angry. The issue is leadership: who's in charge? And Jesus said "The greatest among you is the one who is the least."

It must have been an ongoing point of contention, because all three synoptic gospels include this conversation, some more than once. John doesn't record the argument, but Jesus' response is similar, *after washing his disciples' feet*.

In today's text, Jesus contrasts two models of leadership.

The disciples' grasp of leadership was typical: authority. Power. Control—the way of 'the kings of the Gentiles'. In Jesus' response, "the contrast could not be greater. Think about leadership you've observed. What are its dominant values? Now compare that with what Jim Wallis calls the *transformative ethic* of servant leadership. The first shall be last—those who want to lead will be servant of all.³

It's an ongoing issue for us, too. In the New Testament I find three ways to reclaim Jesus through servant leadership:

1. A servant leader does not seek his or her own glory. John the Baptist, a servant leader sees himself as a "friend of the Bridegroom" (John 3:29), and is not pre-occupied with the visibility of his own role.

² Wallis, Jim. Christ in Crisis (p. 46-47). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

³ Ibid., p 113-114.

2. A servant leader sacrificially seeks the benefit of those he or she serves. Jesus said, "...I came not to be served but to serve..." (Matthew 20:26, 28).
3. A servant leader will waive his or her own rights rather than obscure the truth. Paul sometimes abstained from certain foods, refused financial support from those he served, went hungry, dressed poorly, was beaten, homeless, endured disrespect inside the church... (1 Corinthians 4:11-13; 9:4-7).

No human leader will manifest all these marks of servanthood. In our lifetimes, some have come closer than most: I think of people like Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandella, Rosa Parks, Jimmy Carter, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Malala Yousafzai, Pope Francis...

When he was introduced to his brother cardinals, Francis refused to use a platform to elevate himself over them. He chooses to live in a small suite in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the apostolic palace. He drives a Ford Focus instead of getting around in an extravagant limousine or gas guzzling S.U.V.

There's a story about his first morning after being elected. As he left his apartment the Pope found a Swiss Guard standing at attention outside his door.

He asked, "And what are you doing here? Were you awake all night?"

"Yes," the guard answered respectfully.

"Standing? And you're not tired?"

"It's my duty Your Holiness, for Your safety."

The Pope went back into his apartment and returned with a chair: "At least sit and rest."

Shocked, the Guard replied, "Forgive me, but I can't! The rules don't allow it."

"The rules?"

"My captain, Your Holiness."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I'm the Pope and I am asking you to sit down."

So, between the rules and the Pope, the Guard chose the chair. Then the Pope brought him some bread and jam for a snack, saying, "Buon appetito, brother."

Leadership that reflects the transformative ethic of servant leadership.

When leadership becomes utterly defined by power and by winning and losing, Jesus says leadership is about serving.

As Christians, if we are to reclaim Jesus, we will seek out and support candidates for leadership—at any level—who demonstrate those qualities before we consider their party affiliation—or our own.