

People wonder, where does the preacher come up with Sunday themes? At the moment I'm not using the lectionary, the time honored cycle of readings in most traditional Christian churches. I have often noted two major themes in Christian preaching, which could be called our vertical and horizontal callings, to love God and to love neighbor... or the inner spiritual life, and life in society (how to relate to neighbors, near and far.)

The "horizontal" emphasis of the Christian faith, to love the neighbor, logically includes the neighbors who are from another culture, another race, and even another nation. Thus, the Christian faith will always address national and international relations. So this morning I chose to address this extended horizontal calling, to love the neighbor, even those beyond our immediate neighbors.

Our music leaders and I always work together on a theme, and we know that Phil has already addressed today's theme pointedly with music and poetry! He found the poem *The New Colossus*, by Emma Lazarus. So poignant and challenging: Our Colossus, or "huge statue," the Statue of Liberty, Is "NOT like brazen giants of Greek fame with conquering limbs," but is a "woman with a torch"... who is a "Mother of Exiles." (*Give me your tired, your poor, the homeless, tempest-tossed*).

Our Statue of Liberty is of course still relevant today... many homeless and tempest-tossed, in seas all around the world, seeking a new home, new opportunities, and freedom in a new land, just as our ancestors did. And the Statue of Liberty echoes wonderfully the teachings of Jesus: Matthew Chapter 5: "Blessed are the poor"... and Luke Chapter 4 where Jesus says: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." And of course the final judgment told in Matthew

chapter 25, where God welcomes into heaven those who gave care to the “least of these,” who gave food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and welcomed the stranger. The Apostle Paul echoes all this also: “God chose what is weak in the world... God chose what is low and despised in the world.” (1Cor.1:28-9)

The values and spirit of the Statue of Liberty are Jesus’ values and spirit. It is all about compassion, all about care for those who are in need, those even in exile, seeking asylum from violent gangs and governments. There must be a way to be more compassionate with refugees; Whatever happened to “compassionate conservatism?” Conservatism says, Hey, we have reached our limit with the number of immigrants; Yes, this is happening all over the world. But Compassion dictates that we do our best to treat them humanely and give them due process. Compassion says we will increase our judges and courts to hear your case, so you don’t have to wait years to plead for asylum. Compassion says we will spend more money on due process than on rounding up people and sending them to foreign prisons. Having a “quota” for deportations ignores the due process of justice. Cruelty and racism say: “You come from S-hole countries, you are poisoning the blood of our country,” and we will deport you as soon as possible even if it means separating parents and children. And we will detain you in small holding cells with no privacy, and no health care.

Phil also addressed our society’s lack of peace and justice in his version of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” song. The first few times I heard the Leonard Cohen song, I noticed mostly the memorable tune. It took me awhile, listening to the lyrics more closely, to discover that the song had so much pain and disillusionment in it. As with Leonard Cohen’s version, Phil

addresses our suffering, the “pain across this land.” I like the line, “Is *Justice* just a fleeting dream?” When we pledge allegiance to the flag, and “one nation, with liberty and *justice* for all,” is there really fair treatment for all?

And of course Jesus’ values and spirit are found in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all (men) are created equal, and endowed by our creator with inalienable rights”.... Yes, human rights! The right to fair treatment by governments: no oppression, no treatment like second-class citizens.

Isn’t it “self evident” that the way of Jesus is the way of the original *ideals* of our country. And self-evident that Jesus’ way is opposed any form of oppression, to governments that are authoritarian, which is the way of an Empire. An empire has an emperor, one who rules by dominating as an authoritarian. The rule is by wealth and power, even brutal power when necessary; The Roman Empire crucified thousands who disagreed with the emperor and the military rule, and Jesus was among them. When Jesus saw economic corruption at the Temple, abuse of the poor by the ruling wealthy and priests, he turned over the tables and told them that they had made the Temple a den of thieves.

As Christians, we are called to repentance, all of us, to change whatever ways we and our nation have that can be considered oppressive. Jesus said his mission was to set at liberty the oppressed. Therefore we have a duty to name things which are unjust, not fair, privileging certain people over other people. We need to do that regardless of what party is in charge. Yes, Deportations started well before the current administration, yet the guidelines for how to treat detainees are so important. I

dare say, however that the current administration, and what ICE has been doing shows cruelty and ignores humane guidelines.

As Christ resisted the brutal rule of the Roman Empire, and had teachings that uplifted the lower classes, many Christians have resisted domination systems and empires over the ages. In Germany in the late 30's and early 40's the resistance was called the Confessing Church, led by Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Reich means Empire, 1st Reich being the Holy Roman Empire, the 2nd Reich being the German Empire of 1870 to 1918, the 3rd Reich being Hitler's Nazi Regime of 1933 to 1945. Sadly the mainline German churches were going along with the notions of the Aryan Supremacy, that race being superior while imprisoning and killing others... and most churches were afraid to confront Hitler.

But Jesus has always been against rule by brutal force. The Holy Roman Crusades were of course an abominable twisting of Christ's teaching. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, the capitol of his country. The other day I saw attached to a truck cab an image of the Statue of Liberty with hands over her face, weeping. Jesus still weeps, and leads us to resist anything counter to his teachings.

Christian nationalism in this country is a total twisting of Christianity. It is heresy. Jesus resisted the way of empires and nationalism; he embraced diversity. Jesus always crossed tribal and national boundaries, welcoming the stranger. Please consider attending the talk by Rev. Dr. Jon Paul Sydnor on Christian Nationalism, Sunday Oct.4, 7pm, and invite anyone you know who is wrestling with how the Christian faith relates to what is going on in our world...What did Jesus teach and What Would Jesus Do? I think his central teachings are self-evident! Amen.