

Galatians 3: 21-28 "The Underbelly of Christianity" Rev. Janet Chapman 6/30/24

Jeopardy question of the year: Formerly an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), this US President was the only minister ever elected to that position. Answer is ?? My book study folks can't answer this one... I will give you another hint. He is also one of only four Presidents to be assassinated while in office. Answer is ?? (James Garfield). In the 1870's, Garfield's church was affiliated with the oldest denomination founded on American soil. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) evolved alongside the nation's development, prompting one nonsectarian historian to label it an "American original." Given our history as American-made, our denomination would seem to be an unlikely candidate to take on the growing problems with Christian nationalism. At our 2023 General Assembly in Louisville, a motion was passed to educate church folks about the basic theological and ideological dangers of using national and religious identities for partisan means. Basically, it was a warning to beware of those advocating for an entanglement between allegiances to both God and country, unable to separate one from the other. Speeches and workshops at that national gathering educated attendees on how such alignments diminish the mission of the church, contradict the gospel, and undermine the tenets America was founded on, namely freedom of religion. These alignments are damaging both the church and the state.

As a growing movement across our country, where more than 60% of Protestants embracing or sympathetic to Christian nationalism, it is now being revealed as inconsistent with Jesus' teachings and coming at the church like a wolf in sheep's clothing. Many are being blindsided by a rhetoric which touts violence and revenge over unity and love. In our church, we highlight Jesus' united mission of love as our direction. One of our mantras is "in non-essentials, diversity; in essentials, unity; and in all things, love." Our essential foundation is found in Christ alone; therefore, our words and deeds are couched in agape, that unconditional love of God. From such foundations, we as people of faith are trying to navigate in a new dimension where we strive to set political and societal divisions aside and look to Jesus' teachings and example as the heart and soul of our existence. Promoting division and stratification of the human family, to the detriment of the unity spoken of in our

scripture today, runs counter to who we are as faithful disciples, “little d” and “big D,” of Christ. God challenges us to call out heresy wherever and whenever it is encountered because it harms the relationship God has with the world. It causes people to mistrust God and the church. It becomes a stumbling block to every child, no matter their age, in approaching God as they are. Some of you may remember what Jesus said about those who cause a vulnerable and fragile one to stumble, about it being better to have a millstone around the neck and be thrown into the sea than to be caught doing such a thing. I can’t tell you how many conversations I have had with vulnerable people over my 40 years in ministry who have been abused by the church’s divisive tendencies, their judgmental attitudes, and their refusal to accept a God who works outside their prescribed agenda. The church tends to say one thing and do another, and these contradictions are what Jesus critiqued again and again with the Pharisees and Sadducees.

I realize this may be uncomfortable for some of you sitting here and for that, I apologize because there are some things about following in the footsteps of Jesus that are very difficult, very uncomfortable. We don’t like it when the world invades our bubble of faith nor do we like it when that bubble of faith invades our world. But I remind you, we here in this room didn’t ask for this conversation to come knocking at our door. We have done pretty well at embracing one another no matter what our worldview is, we have looked one another in the eyes and seen the love of Christ shining back, we have stood in this family sharing bread and cup, and felt that loving bond which transcends those non-essentials of our daily lives. But there are powerful forces at work which seek to retrain our thought processes; they press on us with greater urgency to recreate God in our own image. Voices ring out, “You aren’t Christian if you think this, do this, stand for this...You aren’t a great American if you think this, do this, stand for this.” Then it becomes tempting to allow those voices to pull out of context those miniscule scriptures which appear to support such a view, while neglecting the abundant wealth of stories that portray Jesus’ character and overall teachings. Please remember that when we operate from an arrogance that says this nation was founded on Christianity, and particularly our form of Christianity, we forget that the Puritans fled Europe to have freedom of religion, freedom from a ruling church that told them

what to believe and when. Yes, most of those early settlers carried their Christian faith with them, but it was not a faith regulated by the state, but by their relationships with God and own personal opinions. How is it we can therefore justify designating any nation to be one religion or another? How can we argue for Christian supremacy when there are so many non-essentials in the practice of Christianity that we can't even agree among them ourselves? What about the Jews, what about the Muslims and Hindus, people who are 4th and 5th generation Americans, and what about the indigenous people who were here long before our people? Are we so arrogant that we can say God rejects them because if so, then we have a real problem with Jesus' words and example? We would be safer to discount Jesus' life altogether because of how it contradicts such an approach. Yet, here we are trying to recreate a nation that will regulate our beliefs, that will overturn a democracy, and give the church power once more to legislate our faith practices. All of this is what Brian McLaren calls the "underbelly of Christianity," and if taken to the extreme, could not only destroy our wonderful nation, founded through the sacrificial living of many heroes, but also the Christian faith, founded through the sacrificial living of Jesus Christ. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr summarizes, "We are either going to learn to live together as family or die together as fools."

McLaren provides hope, which I'm sure all of us need just about now, including me. He says that the worst moments in our lives can set the stage for our very best moments, if we don't give up and succumb to despair or cynicism, if we remain strong and keep striving. In the aftermath of each crisis, even in utter collapse, life finds a way and new possibilities emerge. We witnessed it after the Carr Fire. For example, that fire opened the door locally for 3D printed homes to emerge and Redding is now one of the central hubs nationwide for such buildings. Jesus' teachings reveal this pattern with all his talk about death and resurrection, buried seeds and new growth, corruption and rebirth, wide highways to self-destruction and narrow paths to abundant life. This pattern invites us to set free our old God concepts and restrictions, judgments and divisions, to let them die, and see what rises from the tomb.

Even Jesus as a Jew had to learn this the hard way. Consider Matthew 15:21-28 where the Canaanite woman, a Gentile, seeks out Jesus' help for her daughter who was suffering

from a demon possession, most likely what we would now understand to be a mental health issue. He turns her away indicating he has come for the lost sheep of Israel, but she is undeterred and pleads as a compassionate mom who loves her little girl. In that moment, it is as if Jesus transforms before our very eyes as he says, "Oh, woman, your faith is great!" It is a powerful and dramatic teaching tool Matthew shares with us, possibly understanding that a model of growth and transformation in Jesus' case is far more helpful than a model of perfection. Jesus' understanding of his mission evolves over time just as ours will do as people of faith. As we move forward in our evolution, we may have to learn how to pass through the nay-sayers, the Pharisees, those who have lost touch with what it means to have allegiances to Christ first and nation second. We pass through and move on because we don't pass their purity test.

So we may have to find new teachers and mentors who can walk with us towards Christianity's deeper, wider, and more grace-filled door. In that new place, if we dare to enter it, we will look around and see that all are welcome there. McLaren describes the place saying, "People have come from many different spaces, but find themselves on that same path of love. Muslims have come in their caravan of love. Jews have pursued the Torah of solidarity. Buddhists have followed the noble truth of compassion. Sikhs have learned to see no stranger, and Hindus have descended into essential oneness. Atheists and agnostics have discovered in humanism a path into our common humanity. {And there} you will discover a unity that thrives in diversity and a diversity that contributes to unity, like many instruments and voices coming together to make the same glorious music full of aching joy and soaring sorrow." Labels will fall by the wayside as artifacts from our childhood, because as adults we will no longer serve walls that keep us apart. Instead, there will be windows, doors, and portals through which we will encounter one another, heart to heart. We will, in the words of Paul in First Corinthians, "become all things to all people," that through God's grace, humanity might be redeemed. And in Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one... heirs according to God's promise." May we come to enter that narrow door and recognize our family to be, Amen.