

Christian Nationalism

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Texts: Luke 13: 30-35

Luke 13:30-35 - [Jesus said] And look: “There are those who are last who will be first, and there are those who are first who will be last.” In that same hour some Pharisees approached, saying to him, “Leave and get away from here, for Herod wishes to kill you.” And he said to them, “Go tell that fox, ‘Look, I exorcize demons and accomplish healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I reach my destination.’ Furthermore, it’s necessary for me to continue my journey, today and tomorrow and the day following, because a prophet may not perish outside Jerusalem. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one killing the prophets and stoning those sent to her, how often I have wished to gather your children as a bird would gather her nestlings beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t have it. Look: Your house is desolate. I tell you, you most surely will not see me till the time when you will say, ‘Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord.’”

A few weeks ago, I led a 10:00 adult formation session about Christian Nationalism. I want to share some of that material with you today, with apologies to those who were present and have heard the beginning of this before. I need to talk about Christian Nationalism because reading today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke demands it, and because there just might be, maybe, some connections to the contemporary scene.

My starting point might surprise you, because in talking about Christian Nationalism, I want to try to love my enemies. And to be clear, those who think in terms of Christian Nationalism are my enemies. I believe it is an idolatrous expression of Christianity and, to borrow a vivid expression from Jesus, when the Good Lord comes there is going to be a lot of “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” and banging on the door from the outside, by those who adhere to this ideology.

However, I am called to love my enemies, and part of love – as good people try to do whenever we are faced with people who are different than ourselves – part of love is trying to see people as they see themselves. So, making an attempt at neutrality for just a moment, and so as not just to be punching at a strawman, here’s how I would define Christian Nationalism: Christian Nationalism is a religious, moral, and political expression of Christianity. It is the idea that Christianity is the true religion, and that “Jesus is Lord over all things,” so people who follow Jesus have the duty to be “lords” in his name. Such faithfulness to Jesus as Lord over all includes the belief that using the power of government to bring about, and enforce, a certain Jesus-friendly way of life for all is not only acceptable, but is a Christian duty, all for the sake of a “better” society.

So, let me unpack that for a bit: The roots of Christian Nationalism actually come from within our Biblical faith tradition. Ever since Saul became the first King of Israel way back in the book of Samuel, God and King, “church” and “state,” have been closely entwined. Even after the Babylonian Exile, when Israel was no longer an autonomous nation, they had kings, vassals of whatever empire ruled them. And of course, in the Biblical sense, the very language that we sing so joyously, “King of kings, Lord of Lords,” reflects the union of God and king.

Christianity seemed to shed this entwining of church and state in the early years of the church, but in 325, when the Roman emperor Constantine left the tired old Roman gods behind and converted to Christianity, the church was quick to entwine with state power once again.

In reality there has been huge variety in the way the church in any given place and time has related to the state, but the dominant mode that landed on these shores in the 1500 and 1600s was God and king, church and state all the way. Even the non-conformist pilgrims, landing down the way there, didn't come here to establish freedom of religion for all, but to be free to practice their religion and to impose it upon anyone who lived among them – and, of course, upon the people who lived here when they arrived. It's true that the American Revolution changed the relationship between church and state, but there was still every expectation among all involved that Christianity, or at least broadly Christian morals, would and should remain dominant.

According to today's Christian Nationalists, however, somewhere along the way, that dominance was lost, replaced not by wickedness per se, but by an a-moral, a non-moral, a morally neutral vibe. As these people understand it, the brilliance of this vibe is its subtlety. Live and let live. You do you. But what you do you wrought was things that a certain version of Christian couldn't accept – like legalized abortion, gay marriage, and apparently green M&Ms.

So, again, in its self-understanding, the Christian Nationalism of today is an attempt to reestablish a certain type of Christian dominance that was once taken for granted, but which at some point over the past 70 years, was lost. And this involves a willingness to use the powers of the state to achieve that goal. As foreign as this may sound in Cambridge in 2025, I hope you hear my point: In holding these views, the Christian Nationalists that I am today naming as my enemies, are closer to the long history of church / state relations than any alternative today.

But Christianity is a strange thing, and at the core of our faith there is, and always has been, a disruptive element. In every era that church and state have been aligned, all the way back to that first moment when Saul was made king...you all do know that story, right?

Back before the monarchy, Israel was not a state, but was rather a people (or even a "nation," - although we associate that term with nation-state, which Israel was not). They were not the biggest, strongest people, however, and they looked around at the empires around them, and said, "Hmmm...if we had a king, we could be powerful like them!" So, basically, they said to God, "God, we want a king." And God said, "You have a king. I am your king." And the people said, "No, we want a real king!" And God said, "If I give you a (human) king, he will rape all your woman, take all your children into slavery, and draft all your men to go off and die in battle." And the people say, "Yeah!! That's what we want!!" So God, reluctantly gives them a king. It all plays out in 1 Samuel, chapter 8.), , there was a counter message, a strand of bold truth that said, "No, this is not the way." Do you know that story from the eighth chapter of first Samuel?...

So all the way back to that first moment when Saul was made king, "church" (religious power in whatever form) and "state" have been aligned. The same idea is found in the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 26, the false prophets calling for Jeremiah's death because he has denounced the alignment of church and state embodied in the city of Jerusalem: "This man deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears," the false prophets say. Then

Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, “It is the Lord who sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you. But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you.”

That's actually the passage Jesus was bringing to mind in today's reading from Luke: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one killing the prophets and stoning those sent to her, how often I have wished to gather your children as a bird would gather her nestlings beneath her wings, but you wouldn't have it.”

What Jesus is condemning here, well actually, lamenting is probably better – what Jesus is lamenting here is the alignment of secular and religious power, of church and state. He's lamenting the Judean rulers like Herod, that fox, as Jesus disparages him, and all those aligned with him who claim the authority of God, but rule by the will of, and by the power of, of Rome. Herod wanted to kill Jesus because Jesus took the mantle of the prophets like Jeremiah, and said to those who aligned God's power with state power, “No, this is not the way.”

For the first 300 years after Jesus, this prophetic message held firm. And even after the prophetic message was suppressed, as church and state were united again after Constantine, the thread of prophetic truth remained: the monastic movement of the early middle ages, the movements of care and compassion that followed in the wake of St. Francis, the Anabaptist movement, the Black Church, and all prophetic voices today that are calling this... (show picture of Trump holding a Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church in 2020 – example here:

[https://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/2020/06/12/donald-trump-bible-and-white-supremacy\)...what](https://www.hds.harvard.edu/news/2020/06/12/donald-trump-bible-and-white-supremacy)...what) it is – idolatry.

In this season when we are searching for wellsprings in the wilderness, we simply, but also carefully and wisely, just need to look at our own tradition. From the very beginning, the prophetic message has been there – sometimes quietly, often subversively, always courageously – the message that has said, plainly, this (point to the picture) is idolatry.

But I feel like I need to take one more step today, perhaps a more challenging step, given that pointing out the president's apostasy is fairly low hanging fruit. This is the season of Lent, a time when we are encouraged by our tradition not simply to tell the truth about the world around us, but to tell the truth about ourselves as well. And it is worth thinking about the way that idolatry, as ugly and blatant as it looked in that picture, is manifest in us as well. Are there not ways we still cling to an echo of that ideology?

This has been one of the deepest revelations of the past seven weeks for me. It seems I am not, I might even say we are not, as free from this as we thought we were. We have been jerked around over and over again in the last seven weeks, certainly emotionally, if not yet in more practically consequential ways, like financially. We have been jerked around by one man cutting funding here, attacking people we care about there, gaslighting everyone with lies about immigrants, tariffs, Ukraine, and a thousand other things.

Now I am, like, hardcore into grounding my identity in Jesus, but - and believe me I am preaching to myself here as well - I have allowed myself to be jerked around by all this. It is hard for me to admit, but

I have felt controlled by this man. I hate it that he has that much power over me. Another way to put this is that I have felt less free.

Why? Because deep in my little Christian brain there is still the message of alignment between church and state – or maybe not church and state, but certainly church and culture (including state) – that all those big people should be doing what Jesus wants them to do. And they should, of course they should. But here's the nuance, if what they are doing leaves me feeling lost, powerless, and disengaged, then maybe my identity wasn't as grounded in Jesus as I thought. Maybe I am clinging that ancient alignment still.

You want a wellspring in the wilderness? Our wellspring is that we are followers of Jesus of Nazareth, and that is the greatest grounding of our lives. We have good, truthful, public, generous, loving work to do, the work to which Jesus calls us.

It is faithfulness that defines who we are, not just impact. And I have enough of scripture in this little brain of mine to hear the still small voice that tells me that the Christian idea of impact follows the pattern of death and resurrection, not influence and success.

This why I've been saying lately that the progressive church may well be the best hope of providing actual resistance to what is happening in this country...because we serve a different Lord, and we have a power base, a grounding, that doesn't rely on the federal government, or even on cultural power. Now, I don't mean to blame the victim here, but we're seeing too many ways higher education is compromised and can't lead the resistance. Corporate powers are too often slaves to the bottom line and aren't going to lead the resistance. The corrupted and idolatrous Christian right surely isn't going to lead the resistance. Everyone is afraid that they are going to be the next target of the administration's erratic vitriol.

But we have a different wellspring. We have a long tradition of resistance, a long tradition of trusting that faithfulness, no matter the cost, is the only form of power that is consistent with love - love even for our enemies, those who currently worship power.

Washington, O Washington, the one killing the prophets and stoning those sent to her, how often I have wished to gather your children as a bird would gather her nestlings beneath her wings, but you wouldn't have it.

I close with the words of Majora Carter, the truth-teller we are celebrating and learning from today. Speaking of all who seek to embody the way of love in the world, she said (near the end of her 2006 TED talk), "We all share one incredibly powerful thing: We have nothing to lose, and everything to gain."

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.