

## **“In the Shadow of a Steeple: Time for a post-American Church?”**

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Texts: *Matthew 5:1-12, Micah 6:1-8, Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31*

This coming week I'll be applying to start early retirement Social Security benefits. Those of you who've already past that marker know what a milestone it is. It's intimidating, and can make you anxious. The good thing it does is make you focus your attention. That's why I relinquished more than half my pastoral job description. I want to give significantly more time to analyzing the reality in which we live, both as citizens of the United States and as followers of Jesus.

In preparation for today I've scoured my electronic and print files for how we in the Circle have broached the topic of "empire." I was surprised. I'd forgotten how many times sermons from this podium have addressed the question of empire. It's a conversation that's come up fairly frequently in our meetings and gatherings and retreats, as well as here in our worship services. It's not a new topic.

The issue of "empire" is prominent in two major statements we've made as a congregation in recent years—our "peace church" statement in 2012 and our 2007 open letter, titled "We Say No" to a proposed attack on Iran.

The topic isn't new to us. But our responses have been piecemeal and occasional. So the question I want to put on the table today is whether this might be the time to do something more comprehensive.

This is one of those Sundays when the lectionary texts each deserve a month of Sunday sermons and Sunday school studies. You've already heard the Gospel text read, as the call to worship. I'll not read the entirety of the other texts, but it's worth summarizing key points.

Today's Psalm, #15, has language that is echoed in the Beatitudes from Jesus' sermon on the mount. Interestingly, though, the text gets a lot more specific at points, including the culminating admonition: "do not lend money at interest" (v. 5). Can you imagine the response if, in a fit of religious piety, Janet Yellon, our new Chair of the Federal Reserve, were to announce such a fiscal policy?

The text from the Prophet Micah ends with that familiar trilogy which is often referenced in our Circle: God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). That statement is what inspired our congregational motto of "seeking justice, pursuing peace, following Jesus."

Today's reading from the Newer Testament Epistles returns to that odd logic in the Apostle Paul's thinking, where he talks about the "foolishness" of the cross, about God's habit of choosing what is "foolish in the world to shame the wise" and "what is weak in the work to shame the strong" (I Cor. 1:18-31).

Both the Beatitudes and this teaching from Paul call to mind the "upside down" character of the coming Reign of God. Together with the instructions from Micah and the psalmist these texts point to the way God's work of salvation is not something we get beyond history and in a heavenly, disembodied land far, far away. Rather this salvation is also liberation which breaks out in the midst of fleshly life.

But to arrive at this beatific vision involves a new orientation that begins with a process of disorientation. Getting confused is the first step in getting saved.

You get a sense of this confusion when you first look at the map I've brought for display, with the north and south poles reversed so that everything looks upside down. Have you ever wondered by "up" is always north? It's just a habit, one that began with the Greco-Roman scientist Claudius Ptolemy in the second century.

When I was in high school, I was driving and turned down one of the major thoroughfares in the town where we lived . . . and instantaneously, momentarily, felt like I'd entered the Twilight Zone. I had driven down this street hundreds of times, but suddenly I felt like I was lost. The really confusing part was that all the signs and shops were familiar, but somehow disordered. It was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

It took me about 10 seconds to realize the reason I felt so confused was because the street I was on used to be a one-way street; and for the first time I was traveling it in reverse. It had

become so familiar, with the pattern of store and shop signs following one after the other in a particular direction. Now those signs were reversed. Familiar but unfamiliar at the same time.

Disorientating: Blessed are those who mourn?

Confusing: The meek will inherit the earth?

Confounding: Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you?

Perplexing: God is choosing what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are?

Unsettling: Is the Gospel foolishness?

As citizens of the US we are schooled from birth to join the chant: We're #1! We're #1. And the "we're #1" symbol—index finger pointed to the sky—is simultaneously a theological presumption that God, the real and true #1, is on our side, is our sponsor. As recently as his May 2012 commencement address at the US Air Force Academy, President Obama reasserted the judgment that the US is "the one indispensable nation." The claim about being the only indispensable nation was previously used by President Bill Clinton. But this isn't just a "guy thing." Before Clinton said it, his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made the claim and went on to add, in reference to enforcing an embargo on Iraq in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future."

How many times in recent years have you heard a political realist make this sarcastic remark about some far-fetched solution to a problem: "So, you think we should just circle up, hold hands and sing kumbaya!?" Or, remember when former Republican Senate Majority leader Trent Lott was asked in a news conference about the abuse at Abu Graib prison in Iraq? His response? "This isn't Sunday school."

We are indeed #1 in gross domestic product and in military spending—it's still stunning to me to think the US has over 800 military bases in foreign countries, on top of more than 5,000 bases here at home. Or that the number of musicians in US military bands is greater than the total number of professional diplomats in the US State Department. A professional baseball player just signed a contract to make over \$30 million per year; a superbowl TV ad now costs \$150,000 per second; 85 of the world's richest people now control more wealth than half the globe's population. There's something terribly, terribly wrong with this picture.

Among the world's top 20 wealthiest nations, the US is also Number # in poverty rate, rates of incarceration, greatest inequality of incomes, highest social immobility, highest infant mortality and obesity rates, highest percentage of the population that lack health insurance, highest amount of guns at home and weapons sales abroad. The list goes on and on. On top of all this, we still live under the shadow of President Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy Doctrine which declares, for the first time in our nation's history, that the US reserves the right to preemptive war. That is to say that the President of the United States is authorized to take hostile action against any party, any where in the world, simply by chanting the mantra "war on terror."

We are, in short, on the precipice of a permanent state of war<sup>1</sup>, for there are no measurable criteria for when a war on "terror" can be considered complete.

This condition of unimpeachable authority to prosecute war when and where we wish is only recently codified into law; but the condition has been with us from the beginning. Listen to the statement of Pilgrim leader William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth Colony in precolonial America in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. After attaching a Pequot Indian village on the Mystic River, killing approximately 400 Pequot men, women and children, Bradford wrote in his journal:

"It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God." This from those who claimed to be God's new Israel, a "city set upon a high as a light to the nations." This from others who would later announce our country's manifest destiny.

Among the most naked statements of raw imperial motive comes from an historic policy planning study written by George Kennan, then with the US State Department and later

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<sup>1</sup> Significantly, President Obama admitted this in his 28 January 2014 State of the Union speech: "America must move off a permanent war footing."

ambassador to the Soviet Union. Kennan, a Democrat and later critic of President Bush's war in Iraq, wrote the following:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population. . . . In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming. . . . [NO SINGING KUMBAYA]

We should dispense with the aspiration to "be liked" or to be regarded as the repository of a high-minded international altruism. We should stop putting ourselves in the position of being our brother's keeper and refrain from offering moral and ideological advice. We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.

The title for my sermon, "In the Shadow of a Steeple," comes from the so-called "lost" verse to Woody Guthrie's song we sang a few minutes ago. I say the verse was "lost," not because it was unrecoverable but because it disappeared from singing. It's kind of like that line Dr. King used, late in his life, when he forcefully came out against the war in Vietnam and then had the audacity to say that the US was "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." That quote isn't on the new monument to Dr. King in our nation's capital. And rarely do you hear the final verse to Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land":

In the squares of the city, in the shadow of a steeple  
By the relief office, I've seen my people  
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking:  
Is this land made for you and me?

That visual image of the poor standing in soup lines under the shadow of church steeples, steeples built early on in our nation's life in the center of city squares—that is to say, at the center of political and economic power, providing ecclesial authorization for the hoarding of resources and the division between the "makers" and the "takers"—that image disturbs me greatly.

Contemporary use of "freedom" language disturbs me greatly—freedom language being so essential to the biblical story, a story which orbits around the Hebrew prison break from Pharaoh's slave quarters—a story that continues into the Newer Testament's account of Jesus' execution and resurrection coming as it did during Passover observance, the ritual remembrance of that earlier Hebrew freedom movement. Nowadays, freedom has come to mean something altogether different. Economically, freedom means the capacity of corporate capitalism to penetrate and control the economies of other nations. Politically, freedom is defined by the 2010 US Supreme Court's "Citizens United" decision which opens the floodgates of corporation funding of electoral politics. Militarily, freedom reflects the US National Security Strategy's authorization of preemptive war.

And in the church, "freedom" has come to mean "don't ask me to make commitments," don't talk much about money, and don't say much about risk. This reminds me of the scene in C.S. Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." Susan, one of the children who are lead characters, asks Mr. Beaver whether Aslan is a safe lion. "Course he isn't safe," replies Mr. Beaver. "But he's good." The God with whose purposes we align is not safe. God will not always keep us out of harm's way—in fact, that's exactly where the Spirit could end up leading us. But our story says, yes, God is good.

Hiding behind the claim to be "exceptional" is becoming increasingly popular among political leaders in our nation's life. And the implication of the church in such affairs is unmistakable. The "shadow of the steeple" falls again every time one of our elected leaders end their comments by demanding "God bless America."

The question I want to put on the table for you is whether it's time that we undertake an ambitious congregational conversation about whether we should declare ourselves to be a "post-American" church. What might it look like to declare that while we are irrevocably in love with our country, we are deeply distraught over and alienated from our nation? For "America" has come to mean something we can no longer silently abide and thus we must, clearly and unmistakably, announce our opposition.

There are many implications for such a stand; and I can think of several reasons why we shouldn't do this, particularly because of the temptation to arrogance that happens when people of faith try to distinguish themselves from the larger culture; and also because we have the habit of thinking that making statements is enough, when in fact identity statements should actually flow from the concrete shape of our common life.

Anyway . . . there it is. I don't plan to foster or organize such a conversation. I don't want such a statement to be my statement or our pastoral leaders' statement. If this conversation is desired, the request needs to come from within these assembled chairs.

In the meantime, the beatific vision continues washing over us, announcing the coming New Heaven and New Earth. Our common prayer is that it soaks in, that it does it disorienting, confounding work on the way we have been taught to think and act. And that slowly but surely it remakes our life from the ground up.

In the meantime, the meek are getting ready.

In the meantime, Gospel foolishness keeps breaking out in unexpected places.

In the meantime, rock on, you beatitudes. Turn the shadow of that steeple into a resting place for people who know the Beloved Community is on its way.