

“Isms”

Reading: Luke 6:27-38; 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

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As a general rule, I prefer not to plan my preaching based on what's on the evening news. The gospel of Jesus Christ is relevant to our lives and our world in ways that go far beyond the priorities of our news cycle and even our own personal day-to-day concerns, and so my normal preference is to preach the message of the kingdom of God through the seasons of the church and leave it up to the Spirit of God to connect the kingdom to current events and concerns. The announcement of the kingdom, in other words, is relevant in all times and places, and it speaks into all times and places, though not always in the same way. Preachers who let the evening news dictate their preaching schedule are, in my opinion, likely to wind up putting a lot of words in God's mouth.

That being said, events in our nation over the last few weeks have moved me to modify my preaching plan, and hopefully I've done so at the leading of the Spirit. And, in fact, I was leaning toward preaching this even before Friday's Supreme Court decision, but that sealed the deal. We are in the middle of several national arguments these days — I don't call them national conversations or debates, because we don't have those anymore; we just yell — and the responses of churches and Christian individuals have been central to how these events have unfolded. I had intended to preach focused on certain “-isms” in our culture, specifically racism and sexism, not because those issues are the same, but because there are parallels between them, and there should be some overlap in how we as Christians respond to them. But the Supreme Court's decision to legalize gay marriage last week prompted me to expand my focus beyond just the “-isms” to include some thoughts on how we respond to this, as well. And again, I'm not claiming that these issues are all the same, but that our response as Christians ought to generally follow the same lines.

Obviously I'm not going to be able to exhaustively explore three of the most complex and divisive issues of our time in one sermon. But I combine them because as I listen to the arguments, I hear people reacting in certain predictable ways, and I think the message of the gospel guides us to react differently. In particular, those of us who aren't directly impacted by an issue like sexism or racism or gay rights can, it seems, respond by denying the reality of the problem and discounting the experiences of those involved. Or we try to shift the focus of the issue onto ourselves and make the narrative about me, not someone else who might be more impacted by the issue. So, for example, when someone murders nine of our brothers and sisters in Christ because of the color of their skin, and people try to talk about racism, we might claim that racism is no longer an issue in our nation; we've dealt with it long ago, it's not a real problem. Or when someone points out that if you have a woman and a man with equal experience and equal education doing the same job, the woman is likely to be paid a statistically significant amount less than the man, not just in our country but around the world, and we respond by saying that *I'm* not sexist and I've never done a sexist thing in my life, as though that removes the need for the discussion. Or when the issue of gay marriage comes up, and our response is immediately to fear how it might impact *me*, and we ignore the very real and very deep pain that many people are struggling with.

So why is this a gospel issue? A sermon is not a time for a preacher to pontificate about personal opinions or pet peeves; a sermon is a time for the Lordship of Christ to be proclaimed. I contend that these “-isms” are profoundly gospel issues that must be engaged seriously, carefully,

and compassionately. We cannot ignore them, pretend they aren't real, or absolve ourselves of all blame just because I've never done anything blatantly racist, sexist, or homophobic. And I think I do so with good biblical reason.

I chose as our Scripture reading for today a passage out of 1 Corinthians dealing with the Lord's Supper. It requires a little explanation, because part of the significance of the passage isn't obvious to us today. The church at Corinth was fractured in a variety of ways, and one of the ways that those fractures were visible on the surface was in their celebration of the Eucharist, which is what Paul is dealing with in the passage we read. They celebrated communion differently than we do; it was more common in those days for the church to gather and share a full meal as part of the ritual. In this case, apparently some people were getting there early and starting the meal before others could get there, so that some people would arrive and find that the best food was already gone and some people had already had too much wine. And that's obviously a problem.

But the real problem goes much deeper than just one of rudeness. The real problem appears to be one of classism, that is, discriminating against certain people based on their economic situation. It's a rich versus poor problem. In that society, the people who would have had the time and the flexibility to arrive early would have been the people with money, while average, working-class folks would have had to work later. So instead of being a means of demonstrating the unity of the body of Christ and the indiscriminate grace that is open to all who will come and erases all social distinctions, this celebration of the Eucharist becomes yet one more way of reinforcing the divisions in society. And here's the thing: it may be that the rich people enjoying the meal early may not have had any intention of discriminating against their less wealthy brothers and sisters in Christ; let's give them the benefit of the doubt.

Whether it was malicious or not, though, Paul does not hold back from scolding those involved. He's almost exasperated, in fact. We might argue that there are legitimate reasons for why this might be acceptable; people have different schedules, and if those schedules just happen to line up along economic class divisions, well, that's no one's fault, is it? But no, Paul says that this sort of division is despising the church of God by humiliating those who have less. No room for excuses.

In other words, the divisions and injustices in human society are often far more subtle and complex than we'd like them to be, and pretending that they're not an issue because I don't see it happening and it doesn't affect me is not acceptable. The kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus Christ, and the grace of Christ is freely available to all who will come, and the Spirit of God is given to all those who belong to Christ, and He gives gifts as He sees fit, and He calls us into the beloved community of His family in which the only distinction that truly matters is whether you are walking with Christ or not.

Here are only a couple of examples of how subtle these "-isms" can be. Out of a fear of inappropriate relationships or temptations or accusations of sexual impropriety, male leaders in the church often have a policy, either official or unofficial, of not being alone with a woman who is not their wife. Seems reasonable. But what happens when you have a young female student in ministry who is looking for a mentor? The male church leaders won't mentor her, so the male ministry students get mentoring and advance in the church while females get left behind. So the leadership ratio continues to be skewed toward men, and the women still can't get mentored, and the status

quo doesn't change. And again, let's give them the benefit of the doubt: no one involved has to be personally sexist for the whole system to be sexist.

Or another example: in Buffalo, New York in the 1960s, a parkway lined with trees and green spaces was demolished to make room for the new Kensington Expressway, which would theoretically allow commuters from the suburbs to access the city more quickly. The problem is that the new expressway allowed only limited access to the minority communities that lived along the old parkway, so there's now a physical barrier separating the races in Buffalo and making it so that the wealthier, predominantly white suburbanites can literally bypass their poorer black neighbors. Again, no one involved has to be accused of being overtly racist for us to take seriously the very real and lasting economic and social hardships that a city planning issue has made for generations of minorities in Buffalo.

We could go on and on with example after example of ways that one group of people, deliberately or inadvertently, gains some subtle advantage or displays the fact that those on the outside remain on the outside. And it seems to me that we now have a culture in which when these uncomfortable realities are brought to our attention, whether it relates to sexism or racism or class divisions or sexuality or whatever, our immediate reaction is to deny the reality of the problem, discount the experiences of those who are impacted by it, and sometimes even try to shift the conversation around so that we make the conversation about *our* problems instead, so that we're no longer on the defensive. And when we respond in such a way, we are in reality struggling to maintain control over the narrative, and we end up deepening the divisions and the hurt.

The gospel of Jesus Christ offers us a better way. Many of these conversations, especially when it comes to the discussions about gay marriage, are framed in terms of what might happen to us if gay marriage happens; that is, how this will affect the church. I think that's the wrong question. Instead, our response ought to be to ask: If this happens, will we be the church? In discussions about racism, how can we be the church? Rather than being afraid of what might happen if we have an honest conversation about sexism or racism or sexuality, we are called to be fearless. We begin with the reminder that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and so before we begin pointing out the failures of others, we remember our own sin. You are I are here purely because of the grace of God, and that grace is offered freely to others as well. And so into these raging arguments, we have a message and a witness to offer unlike anyone else: we can offer the hope of redemption by the work of God, and the hospitality of the body of Christ, and the fruit that comes from the presence of the Spirit, and the reality of transformation and freedom from the darkness.

So today I challenge us as a congregation to be fearless people. I challenge us to be fearless in confronting the subtle strongholds of sexism, racism, and discrimination in our own hearts, in our families, in our community, in our nation, and in our world. I challenge us to be fearless in reaching out in imperfect but genuine love toward those who are different than we are. I challenge us to be fearless in loving even our enemies, even the unrepentant, unlovable ones, in the bold hope that even they can be redeemed for the glory of God. I challenge us to be fearless in listening to the stories of those who are different than we are, *really* listening, and taking their experiences and struggles and pains seriously — and then asking the Spirit of God to guide us in how we might help bring redemption and hope in Christ out of those struggles. I challenge us to be fearless in building friendships with people who make us uncomfortable — *real* friendships, not a friendship as a strategy

to get them to come to church or a venue for preaching at them, a friendship in which we grow in love and concern for a person made and loved by God Almighty. I challenge us to be fearless in making this church a place of radical welcome and true Christian hospitality, in which all who will come are given a place of respect to grow in the image of Christ. And if we do that, the gospel of Jesus Christ will be boldly preached through our lives. And perhaps we have not yet even imagined the people in our community and families who will be called to redemption through our love, and together with them, we may bear fruit for eternity.



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