

Sermon for January 31, 2016
Luke 4:21-30
Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our surprising Savior, our guiding Light, our living Lord. Amen

Well, if you want to know the truth, I've just about had it up to here! My tolerance for scare tactics, jingoism, lies and bravado has reached its limit. I'm talking, of course, about the 2016 campaign for President of the United States.

I wish I could simply take the advice of a wise friend in this congregation who has told me and others repeatedly: "Calm down. It's just entertainment. It's a circus with all kinds of crazy performers. Don't take it so seriously. After all, there's a lot more to come!"

Now, I appreciate my friend's words, but every time I hear presidential candidates, on both sides of the aisle, bluster and fume, brag and attack, I can't help myself. I boil over. I start talking back to the television. I hear myself threatening to move to Canada.

I think that part of my problem, and I admit that it's my problem...is that all of the major candidates purport to be people of faith and everyone of them is clamoring for the Christian vote...as well as that of other blocs and sub-groups. My problem is that I hear very little from them, in tone or substance, which I could ever imagine Jesus saying or supporting...at least not the Jesus I know.

What bothers me the most, even more than their vitriolic attacks on each other's integrity, judgement and character, is their uniform assumption that America has the God-given right to do whatever it wants to protect and promote itself over and above every other country and people on the face of the earth. "God bless America!" is their motto and to that end God apparently affirms and holds as sacred everything American... the American Dream, manifest destiny, capitalism, the Constitution of the United States, and so forth. Even more alarming, I think, is God's apparent approval of carpet bombing, building walls along our borders, religious profiling, justifiable torture and anti-immigration rhetoric.

Such posturing and bravado, designed to attract Christian voters, seems anything but Christian to me.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not a politician, nor do I think that politics is dirty business. I don't. I'm also not claiming that either the Republican candidates or the Democratic candidates have the moral high ground.

But as a Lutheran pastor, I do have thoughts about how the Gospel of Jesus Christ plays out in the world. And the current presidential campaign concerns me.

Perhaps our reading from Luke can be of some help in this whole matter.

You'll recall that in last week's reading, Jesus was the darling of his hometown

listeners. In the synagogue, he'd read Isaiah's words of redemption and blessing for the poor and the oppressed...and he then declared them to be fulfilled in the people's hearing. His listeners were tickled pink. Proud as they could be of their hometown boy who'd proclaimed grace and healing and freedom to them.

But then, in this morning's continuation of that text, Jesus said in so many words: "Not so fast. I'm not necessarily talking about you. When I make reference to God's coming to free the oppressed and bless the poor, I'm talking about God blessing people you can't stand, the people you don't want to be near, the people you think are your enemies. It's not just Syrians and Gentiles, God has a heart for all of us...but especially the outsider, the estranged, the persecuted and the lost."

When the people of Nazareth heard this from Jesus, everyone in the synagogue was filled with rage. They rose to their feet, hustled Jesus out of town, and took him to the edge of a cliff in order to hurl him over the precipice. They wanted to teach him a lesson in response to his refusal to end his sermon with "God bless Nazareth!"

Well, what are we to learn from this?

According to DeAne Lagerquist, Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College, we should remember this: "God's favor is loose, unruly, unconfined by presuppositions about who needs it or who deserves it. It escapes from human boundaries...those marked by brick walls and stained glass, those made of words, those drawn on maps or stamped in passports. We should not be surprised by this, since God's favor has long operated thus." (Luther Seminary, "God Pause" - 1/28/2016)

That's the kind of thing I'd like to hear from any politician claiming to be Christian. I'd like to hear a word that recognizes our common identity as people of God, fellow citizens of a world facing dangerous problems that require calm, compassionate and collective attention and care.

Very recently, Elizabeth Eaton, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, wrote an open letter to our Muslim neighbors, near and far...a letter acknowledging our need to walk and work together. It's an important letter...please listen.

Dear Muslim Sisters and Brothers,

Grace and peace to you. I am writing on behalf of many Christians in this country who wish to share a word of solidarity, love and hope with you in these difficult days.

In our love for you, our Muslim neighbors, we are distressed by the ways in which you are being forced to bear the fears held by many in our nation. Therefore, we renew our commitment to find even more effective ways to protect and defend you from words and actions that assault your safety and wellbeing. We believe God calls us to resist what is divisive, discriminatory, xenophobic, racist or violent, and we want you to look to us as allies and friends.

The global refugee and migrant crisis and the acts of terror committed in this country and around the world are challenges that demand our collective efforts and our

common prayers. Therefore, we will seek to stand shoulder to shoulder with you as agents of peace, justice, understanding, welcome and reconciliation for the sake of the world that God so loves.

In this holy season, when we (celebrate) the light that the darkness cannot overcome, we are reminded of God's gift of life abundant for all. Together with you, we are committed to building a stronger society based on the dignity of each human being, the value of diversity, the holiness of creation and the common good. We pledge our partnership and invite our local communities into continued dialogue and engagement to this end.

In peace, The Reverend Elizabeth Eaton
Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

That's quite a letter, isn't it? It's not the letter of a politician, but I think a wise politician could learn from its tone and substance...especially any politician claiming to be Christian.

Jim Wallis has written: "Who we think Jesus is will determine the kind of Christianity we live." (Jim Wallis, "On God's Side," p. 25)

These words call for serious soul-searching For just as the hometown folks in Nazareth were enraged by the Jesus who revealed himself to them in the synagogue, so might we be surprised, challenged and transformed by the Jesus who lived, died and lives again...to this very day... in our very midst.

In Christ's name,

Amen