



"DISCIPLE: Take Faith Public"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 9

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young

Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth: the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating: for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people: no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime: for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them: they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit: they shall not plant and another eat: for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity: for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Here it is, the end of October. If tomorrow is Halloween, then Christmas can't be far off. And if you're not already doing your Christmas shopping, you're behind! So at least it's time think about Christmas cards—or at least I got to thinking about them as I was preparing this sermon. You know many cards express the familiar message: "peace on earth and goodwill to men." Now on this "Faith in Action" Sunday we think of peace and goodwill as goals our faith holds as worthy of our attention and hope. Seeing them on Christmas cards gives us a good feeling. And yet I wonder: do all these millions of "peace and goodwill" greetings do anything to make peace and goodwill more real in our world? What if a phrase were added such as "Let's get out there and work to make this happen"? Probably that wouldn't do much for Christmas card sales—but it might get some of us thinking more realistically about what peace and goodwill require.

Today we continue our theme of the marks of a Christian disciple: a disciple takes faith public. A disciple knows that faith is more than a private, internal matter. It is lived out in the give-and-take of life in the world. Now in no way does that detract from the importance of inner faith; that has to be real if one's living out is going to be on target. But again and again Jesus made it clear that how one lives is an equal partner to what one believes; indeed it is the validation of one's faith. Or as the writer of James put it, faith without works is dead.

In today's reading from Isaiah 65, the prophet gives us what he sees as God's vision for what life in this world is meant to be. As idealistic as it may sound, it is very much a this-world vision—a world in which people live full lives with safe houses and enough to eat. People do not labor in vain, and they do not hurt or destroy one another. And the implication of this vision is, this is a plan for life worth working for—because it's God's vision. It's the kind of life we humans were created to enjoy. And so we are called to take public our faith in that vision and so work for that kind of world in which all of us are blessed.

Now I think it is evident that one of the major forces shaping our world today is the political realm. We can debate to what extent politics should be shaping us; but the fact is that political decisions do have a major impact. And now we are only days away from an election that will influence our public life for years to come. In addition to our national leadership, here in California we have 17 ballot issues that will influence our living here. So for us who hold to God's vision for life, what will it mean for us to take our faith public in this election?

I want to suggest a radical idea: that we let our faith influence how we vote. I don't think that should be radical at all for Disciples. Yet how often do other considerations crowd into our thinking: How will this impact me economically? How does it fit in with whatever political ideology I prefer? How likeable do I find the candidates? What impact might this have on my lifestyle or personal convenience? I'm proposing that we start first with the question, what light does my faith, my beliefs, my Christian vision, throw on the candidates and issues I will vote on?

Now that means most of us will have some homework before Election Day. It may mean looking more deeply into what candidates stand for and what ballot measures entail. For the California ballot measures, the California Council of Churches has analysis and recommendations on its website churchimpact.org that might be helpful. We may find we need to go deeper in exploring our own beliefs and how they fit with today's political realities; and to the extent we do that, we will be more impactful voters for our efforts. The point is, our public life is too important simply to be left to "politics as usual." Those of us who care about God's kingdom and the values of faith in our world need to be making our impact on the political process.

Now we know how easy it is to get cynical about politics in general—and this year in particular. Many of us wonder how we ended up with the particular candidates and the nasty campaigning of this year's presidential election. And we despair of the ongoing gridlock in Washington that seems to thwart any forward movement. It's enough to make us cynics of the first water whose only reaction is disgust. But leaving it there is really not an option for those of us who have faith in God's intentions for our common life. We are called to put faith into action—even in as murky a realm as the political.

One of my divinity school fellow alums has come up with a name for what I believe we need: she calls it the “politics of the soul.” I believe it’s very similar to what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “soul craft.” King was convinced that needed changes toward civil rights and racial equality would only come about fully when enough people had grown in enough spiritual depth to support these changes. “Soul craft” was the needed prerequisite for effective political and social change. Similarly I see the “politics of the soul” as bringing together the faith insights, beliefs, and vision needed to face up to today’s political realities. Soul politics begins with the basic belief that God loves and values every one of us, whatever our political orientation may be—so the least we can do is show a basic respect for one another, including those we disagree with. It also includes the belief that God has a vision for our common life together, as the prophet Isaiah put forth in today’s lesson, and as Jesus proclaimed in speaking about the kingdom of God. God’s vision transcends our hardened positions of Left and Right and gives us hope for realizing a fuller expression of our common welfare. And I believe soul politics also helps give us perspective. It reminds us that the fulfillment of God’s kingdom is a long-haul venture. What we do now counts, but God’s kingdom will not likely be fulfilled in our lifetime. Our calling is to keep faith with God’s vision in our time—including the political dimensions of that vision.

If enough of us nurtured a politics of the soul, I believe over time it would change our political landscape for the better. Our common welfare would be strengthened; and more of the material and social benefits of our nation would be extended to more people. Peace and goodwill would be something we celebrate instead of just long for. That’s the kind of world I’d like to live in—and I trust the same is true for you. Taking our faith public is the way we get there.

Of course there are many ways to take one’s faith public. I have focused this morning on the political because it is so much the focus of our public attention right now, and because of how important I see it to be. But each of us will find situations in our lives that will call us to put our faith into action; and those will be the points where we can go public as Christian disciples.

One of the illustrations that has guided my thinking for many years is one I heard when I spent a year with the Iona Community in Scotland right after seminary. The founder of Iona, Dr. George MacLeod, was a pastor with a great passion for taking faith public. At one point he was pastor of a Glasgow church that had a stained glass window with the words “Glory to God in the Highest.” One day someone threw a rock through that window and knocked out the “e” in “Highest” so that the window now read “Glory to God in the High St.” That, said George MacLeod, is where the glory of God becomes real—when we take our faith into the city streets and public places and cause it to make a difference there. That, friends, is the calling of all of us as disciples of Jesus!

Notes:

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