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Sermon: God and Politics

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-16

July 24, 2022

Part of our Reformed tradition going well back to some of our early origins in Geneva and Strasbourg and Scotland, is the singing of the psalms in worship. Our first scripture reading was Psalm 146 and our hymn we are about to sing is also set to Psalm 146, to the tune of Old 113th, which I would guess was the original setting in Isaac Watts psalter to psalm 113. So let us stand and sing our psalm, hymn 806, let us make a joyful noise together.

Transport yourself with me, for a brief instant, back to March of 2020, the days our lives changed, the days the world changed, the days before runs for hand sanitizer, toilet paper shortages, and most of new what an N-95 mask was for. Like churches everywhere, we were all figuring how best to make worship available online, provide some semblance of worship and community over Zoom or YouTube or email or Facebook and I remember having a conversation with a mentor and friend, a fellow Presbyterian minister and wise leader in church and theological education. As we were all scrambling to find a fix and pivot to online worship, he expressed, I wouldn't call it skepticism, but maybe serious concern, about turning church primarily into online community. I guess in different ways we all shared his concerns. But what he was most worried about was that our sense of worship in the Reformed Tradition has also been the commitment to public worship on the Sabbath day made available for the sake of the whole community. What we were having to do to keep worship alive for our communities during the pandemic was to further privatize worship and even though we could not help it, moving it into some kind of individual transaction between us and God, us and our screens, and there was little public about it. What had my friend concerned was the importance of the public worship of the Christian community and our obligation to the larger society to offer public worship for the sake of the whole body politic of our particular corner of the earth. What mattered to him was that worship had to public.

Such thoughts seem largely odd and foreign to us, if worship is primarily a consumer activity that should be completely tailored to our individual religious whims and desires. Who cares if worship is public if it's only about a bunch of individuals souls expressing their piety and religious feelings in our own private and particular way. There is nothing more American than that. But worship of the triune God has never intended to be private nor is exercising our private religiosity the same thing as public worship. The early Christian communities, though small in number, were bold in their common confession that 'Jesus is Lord,' and you will find their confession scattered throughout scripture and Paul's letters in particular. And in that context and indeed on Roman coinage and official

Roman government representation you would also find the declaration that 'Kaisar kyrios,' or Caesar is Lord. For this fledgling minority community to say Christos Kyrios or Jesus is Lord instead, was not just a courageous act of faith but a bold political statement about all reality. Those communities were not just saying something private between them and God, but they were saying to each other and the world that the kingdom where Jesus is Lord rules even over that of Caesar, that the way of forgiveness, grace, peace, compassion, mercy, and radical love transcends the way of empire and the way of retribution, greed, and domination by force.¹ Worship in the earliest Christian communities was a public act not a secluded private sphere of individual devotion with the divine. As professor of philosophy James K. A. Smith writes, worship is inherently a 'political act' where the proclamation of the gospel announces a good news that rivals Caesar's. 'The table,' he continues is a revolutionary meal in which even the 'are-nots' (1 Corinthians 1) are invited to sit at the King's table. The weekly gathering of the saints is a [public] rite that rehearses their heavenly citizenship.'²

Far from being a-political, I believe the most politically powerful thing we will ever do with our lives is to worship the triune God, confess that Jesus is Lord, and attempt to live that confession out in the ordering of our lives. I had a colleague who would welcome everyone to worship by saying welcome to this 'worship experience;' and it took everything in me not to stop everything and have it out with an argument right there in the chancel. It's not like we don't experience worship, but first and foremost, worship is something we do for God, it is a communal event and something we do for each other, it is a public act, and something we do for the larger world, and then maybe only then, is it also something for us. The whole point of worship is not to affirm everything we care about or provide us with a 'worship experience' we approve of, the point of worship is to re-order us, to dump all of our lives before God and put it back together again by God's grace, to remind us of who we are, who we really are as children of God, to help us to see once again that we belong to Jesus Christ in life and in death, and through the Spirit to invite us to love our neighbor and to make an impact in this world for Christ's sake. If worship is just about giving us a good feeling and a religious narcotic, or an opiate, to use the language of Karl Marx, then it may not be worship at all. Worship is public and it is political and it may be the most political thing we do in our lives, no matter how we vote, no matter what candidate we support financially, no matter how politically active we think we are in the partisan politics and ideological issues of our day. The most political significant thing we can possibly do with our lives is to worship the Triune God.

¹ See: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/unfundamentalistchristians/2016/01/what-does-it-mean-to-confess-that-jesus-is-lord/>

² James K. A. Smith, 'How (not) to love your neighbor: On faith and politics,' in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 20, 2016).

To that end, we do not have the luxury to exist as an apolitical enclave where we privately engage only in the spiritual, as James K. A. Smith's reminds us again, 'the doxological claim that 'Jesus is Lord' is at the very same time a political act that refuses to say 'Caesar is Lord.'³ Scripture instructs us to pray for 'those in authority,' but not just so our political tribe can prevail and dominate or so our candidate will bring in God's messianic kingdom, but we may enjoined to pray for President Biden or former President Trump or all those in power, not just offering prayers of support or bland civic religion, but we may pray that those in authority 'do better' or care more about injustice for the marginalized or be open to wisdom or find ways to work with their political enemies or to work for political outcomes that will contribute to the betterment of our society and not simply cater to their political base and their own self-interest. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas directs us to his mentor John Howard Yoder with the kind of politics the church presents to the larger world through our worship and life together when we are reoriented by a Messiah 'who gave us a new way to deal with offenders—by forgiving them....a new way to deal with money—by sharing it....a new way to deal with [power] and leadership—by drawing on the gift of every member, even the most humble.'⁴

William McKenzie of the Dallas Morning News reminds us in a column several years ago, that in John Calvin's own estimation, his greatest accomplishment was not the two volume Institutes of Christian Religion which he spent his whole life working on and in which there are various editions. He did not view his greatest accomplishment as his gifted leadership of the Reformation in a time of upheaval and crisis or his thousands of sermons preached week by week, month by month, and year by year at Magdeleine parish or St. Pierre parish or other outlying village churches. He did not view his liturgy, his worship reforms, or his commentaries on nearly every book of the Bible as his greatest accomplishment. In his estimation, McKenzie reminds us that Calvin considered the closed sewer system he was able to convince the Genevan council to build for the city of Geneva as his greatest accomplishment.⁵ He fervently believed that every member of the community, whether they were pious or not, theologically sophisticated or immature, young or old, poor or affluent, fervent Protestant or closet Catholic, Calvin believed that they should have access to the sewer system and flourish free of cholera, dysentery, malaria, and other virulent plagues. A closed sewer system would care for the public health of all members of the city and Calvin believed the church had a vocation, a calling, and a role to play in the legal, political, and economic affairs of the community, society, and country. He was buried in an unmarked grave, but if he had gotten to choose his epitaph, it would have read right at the top, 'he got us a public sewer system.' Or in James

³ James K. A. Smith, 'How (not) to love your neighbor: On faith and politics,' in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 20, 2016).

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, 'Following Jesus in America,' in *Presbyterians Today* (October 9, 2008).

⁵ William McKenzie, Daily Item, 'John Calvin, we hardly knew ye,' October 28, 2009.

K. A. Smith's words, 'our political decisions do affect whether our neighbors are educated and protected, nourished and cared for,' and thus to love our neighbors is to 'desire their flourishing, which ultimately also involves hoping they find themselves in God.' And we should work for 'policies that help them flourish as God has made them' and 'this is why we can't simply avoid the political life.'⁶

In a ground breaking article several years ago entitled 'America's New Religions,' author Andrew Sullivan observed that due to scientific advances, unlimited earthly goods, and a good bit of insulation from 'the vicissitudes of sickness and the ubiquity of early death,' our working belief system in 21st century modernity, rather than some kind of monotheism, could be described as a belief in progress, 'a gradual ascent of humankind toward reason, peace, and prosperity.' He continues: 'we have constructed a capitalist system that turns individual selfishness into a collective asset and showers us with earthly goods; we have leveraged science for our own good and comfort.' The god of progress can satisfy our main wants and needs, but we continue to long for 'a way of life beyond mere satisfaction of our wants and needs.' And as Sullivan reminds us, even more than wants and needs, we are a 'meaning-seeking species.'⁷ Sullivan presents the current religious and political crisis for us in no uncertain terms: 'we have the cult of Trump on the right, a demigod who, among his worshippers, can do no wrong, and we have the cult of social justice on the left, a religion whose followers show the same [woke] zeal as any born-again Evangelical.' Sullivan believes these movements are filling the space in our society and body politic and social media feeds as well, that the Christian faith once occupied, 'without any of the wisdom and culture and restraint that Christianity' offered.⁸

So where does all this leave us with the Sermon on the Mount and trying to live in our world as a community of salt and light and leaven? How are we to head into our Mondays through Saturdays as disciples of a crucified and risen Lord? First, it means that our ultimate meaning can never be grounded first by politics or political tribes and identities. To be a Christian is to not allow politics to define us or to define our opponents. It means as James K. A. Smith reminds us, that we should never feel like our world is collapsing or that nirvana has arrived by the politics or even by who wins and who loses elections. We are a community grounded in Jesus Christ, who by the way David Zahl remind us, was 'rejected by the conservatives and the liberals of his day.' What binds Jesus' community together, is not our 'common righteousness' or even our ability to arrive at all the right political solutions, what binds Christ's community together is not our

⁶ James K. A. Smith, 'How (not) to love your neighbor: On faith and politics,' in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 20, 2016).

⁷ Andrew Sullivan, 'America's New Religions,' *New York Magazine*, December 8, 2018.

⁸ Andrew Sullivan, 'America's New Religions,' *New York Magazine*, December 8, 2018.

strength or rightness, but our 'shared weakness.'⁹ Theologian William Cavanaugh puts it this way: 'if the church in the United States rises from the ashes, it will not be because we elected the right president who packed the federal courts with judges who will defend the church's prerogatives. But nor will it be because the church successfully established its brand as a prophetic agitator for social justice. The church is only attractive [and politically relevant] when people can see the poor Christ in it.'¹⁰

A strange kind of politics indeed. Yet may it keep us from ever thinking that the world is truly transformed in any other way than through the One who was caught in the political cross-fire his day, the One who died violently, rose unexpectedly, and continues to be on the loose through his Spirit, giving us what we need to intervene in the politics of his world, not as partisans of this or that cause or as proponents of this or that party, but first and foremost as disciples, whose lives and actions we hope bear the marks of the crucified and risen Lord, until his kingdom comes.

⁹ David Zahl, *Seculosity*, 158.

¹⁰ William T. Cavanaugh, 'I had to learn to love the church: How My Mind Has Changed,' in *The Christian Century* (June 7, 2021).