

Sermon for Sunday October 11, 2020
Philippians 2:3-11; 3:

Jesus 2020

Let's talk about my new yard sign [hold it up]. How many of you have seen it? Lois and I first saw one like it on our road trip to Indiana. I immediately thought, "that's perfect!" For one thing, it's non-partisan, blue and red. I'm frankly not sure I want to support a political party right now. And for another, it nevertheless declares whose "political platform" (if not political party) Lois and I do want to support. I would even say, vote for.

There are of course some risks to putting this sign in our yard. Anyone who sees it can fairly ask, just what is it exactly that we are trying to say with the sign? Are we suggesting that Jesus is somehow on the ballot? Are we politicizing something which shouldn't be politicized? And in my role as pastor, am I stepping over the line separating church from state, by saying anything at all about the upcoming election?

I am going to set those questions aside for now, and tell you about four] people whom I admire and respect.

The first is Jesus Christ. We all know who he is, right? We learn about him first (and foremost) from the four New Testament Gospels, which tell us both about Jesus' life, and what he taught. But this morning, we have been introduced to Jesus by the Apostle Paul [in the letter he wrote to the church he founded in Philippi]. In one of the most famous passages of the New Testament (which we used for our Call to Worship), Paul tells us that Christ Jesus was "in the form of God" and in fact "equal" to God, but "emptied himself...being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." That pretty much says it all, right? Jesus Christ was as humble as a human can go. But now, he is Lord of all. He is our Lord, here at First Mennonite Church. He is my Lord and Savior, the one whom, upon my baptism, and repeatedly since then, I have pledged my life to imitate his as best I can.

The second man I respect and admire is the Apostle Paul. In this same letter to the Philippians, Paul also introduces himself to us. And he does this, at first by boasting. [We know people like that, right? We're like that!] How successful he is. Or, was. How he was born into a highly respected Hebrew family (the tribe of Benjamin, no less). How he went on to become a Pharisee, that widely respected "political party" of strict followers of the law. How he had become renowned even among the Pharisees for his sheer zeal. Specifically, his zeal in protecting their Jewish faith from this heretic Jesus and his equally heretical followers. How once he finally met Christ (which for him happened on the road to Damascus) none of those markers of status and achievement mattered any more. In fact, he now refers them to "rubbish." The Greek word is *skubala* (which is a fun word to say; say it with me: *skubala*). Sorry, you just said a naughty word. Because *skubala* actually means something far stronger than rubbish, something I'm not going to translate from the pulpit. Let me just use one of its many synonyms: scat. Once Paul had met Christ, he considered his previous markers of status and achievement to be—shall we say—bullscat. No, the markers that matter most to him now are the degree to which Paul has shared in Jesus' sufferings. The degree to which he is learning to model his life

after Jesus. Paul describes this as “the surpassing value of knowing Christ my Lord.” And then he adds, “For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things . . . in order that I may gain Christ.

Paul exhorts the new believers in Philippi to do the same, and then describes a little what that looks like. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Paul was in prison when he wrote those words. Whether it was following this imprisonment or a later one, Paul would indeed give his life for Christ. He was beheaded by the Roman empire. And now Paul’s letters and life are a vital part of our Scripture.

The third man I respect and admire is an 83-year-old man from Argentina whose name is Jorge Mario Bergoglio. Otherwise known around the world as Pope Francis. As pope he could have chosen any name he wished. But he chose to name himself after St. Francis, the late 12th century Friar, mystic, and preacher known most for his humility, his frugality, his caring for the poor, his caring for all of God’s creation (including the animals). We’ve all heard stories about Pope Francis. About how he refused more luxurious living quarters in preference for simple, humble ones. About how he has advocated for the health of the planet, for the impoverished people of the world, for social justice in general. How he has made some people mad. Particularly those who don’t like the changes he is proposing. Those who would stand to lose the most by these changes.

Pope Francis just recently released his third [and possibly final] encyclical. An encyclical, in case you don’t know, is a Pope’s most important, most authoritative vehicle for declaring his current priorities for the worldwide Roman Catholic church. Time magazine recently did a story on this encyclical. Listen to how the article begins. “Pope Francis says the coronavirus pandemic has proved that the ‘magic theories’ of market capitalism have failed and that the world needs a new type of politics that promotes dialogue and solidarity and rejects war at all costs. Francis laid out his vision for a post-COVID world by uniting the core elements of his social teachings into a new encyclical aimed at inspiring a revived sense of the human family. . . the document draws its inspiration from the teachings of St. Francis and the pope’s previous preaching on the injustices of the global economy and its destruction of the planet and pairs them with his call for greater human solidarity.’ Francis rejects even the Catholic Church’s own doctrine justifying war as a means of legitimate defense, saying it had been too broadly applied over the centuries and was no longer viable.”

Is Pope Francis a politician? Absolutely. But to state the obvious, he’s not on the ticket for President of the United States.

The fourth person whom I respect and admire and who I want to talk about this morning is a relatively young man named Shane Claiborne. I know at least some of you have heard of him, and may have even heard him speak (perhaps when he was at Hesston College last year. In Shane studied sociology and youth ministry in college; he did an internship at Willow Grove, the well-known mega-church in Illinois; worked alongside Mother Teresa for 10 weeks in Calcutta; and now has become a leading figure in the so-called “New Monasticism” movement. In addition to being a widely popular speaker, Shane has authored ten books, including one entitled *Jesus for President* (I almost used that for today’s sermon title!). And, an article he wrote very recently was included in the on-line version of *Anabaptist World*, the brand new Mennonite

periodical. The title of that article is “Jesus isn’t on the ballot. That doesn’t mean Christians can opt out.”

Shane writes, “As people of faith, we are desperately in need of a better political imagination—one not confined by party or candidate or the culture wars at all, but one wholly rooted in our faith. We need to be as peculiar as we are political. Jesus was both—political and peculiar.” Shane goes on to point out that every time Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, which was nearly every time he opened his mouth, he was being political, in the sense that he was talking about “real stuff and real people—unjust judges, day laborers, widows and orphans: political stuff. The golden rule—love your neighbors as yourselves—can’t be followed if we ignore the policies and powers that are crushing the lives of our neighbors.”

I wish I had time to read you Shane’s entire article. I heartily commend it to you and will send you the link this coming week. But for now, let me sum up, as he does. “Joining the politics of Jesus is about joining God’s redemptive plan to save the world. It is about allegiance, hope and a new kingdom. So I am indeed hopeful in 2020—not because I have found a candidate who fulfills my deepest hopes, but because I have learned how to hope differently. My hope does not lie in Donald Trump or Joe Biden, or even America. My hope is in Christ alone. Now that we’ve established that—let me be clear. I will be voting on Nov. 3. But I will not be looking for a political savior. I will be looking to do damage control. I’ll be trying to harness the principalities and powers of darkness that are hurting so many children of God. I’ll be voting for the politicians who I believe will do the least amount of damage to the world and alleviate the most suffering for the most people. Though that may sound cynical, I think that’s an appropriate theological posture to have.”

Then he adds some voting advice. “If you have a hard time voting for a particular candidate this year, perhaps consider what it means to vote “for” the people Jesus blessed. Vote for the poor. Vote for immigrants. Vote for families separated at our border...Vote for those without health care. Vote for those who are incarcerated and those who aren’t allowed to vote. Vote for the victims of violence...Vote for love. When we vote for love over fear, we can rest confidently that we voted our faith and put flesh on our prayers. So, I will vote on Nov. 3. I will vote against hatred, and fear, and misogyny...And I will do it because I have pledged my ultimate allegiance to Christ.”

Which brings us full circle. Jesus is not on the ballot in 2020. But perhaps we can use his, and the Apostle Paul’s, and Pope Francis’, and even Shane Claiborne’s own character traits as a guide. Humility, rather than being driven by selfish ambition and conceit. Looking not to their own interests, but to the interests of others. Concern for the poor, the disadvantaged, the outcast. Concern for our own country, yes. But also, concern for the whole world.

Whoever wins on November 3, I’m going to keep my yard sign, “Jesus 2020,” up for a while. As a reminder: that 2020 has been quite a year. An unforgettable year. But through it all, and on into the future, Jesus is Lord. Amen.

Questions

1. What kinds of signs are you comfortable posting in your yard, and what kinds are you not comfortable posting?
2. What was your 1st thought when you saw my yard sign, Jesus 2020?

3. Is it appropriate to talk about a national election during a Sunday morning worship service? What kind of limits should there be?
4. What adjectives would you use to describe the character of Jesus?
5. Is it possible for the president of the United States to be like Jesus? In what ways yes, in what ways no?
6. What kinds of qualifications should matter most for a future president? What kinds should matter least?
7. Would the Apostle Paul have made a good president? In what ways yes, in what ways no?
8. Compare the position of pope to that of a U.S. president.
9. What might what Shane Claiborne calls “a better political imagination, one rooted wholly in our faith” look like?
10. Claiborne says Christians need to be both “political and peculiar.” What do you think he means?
11. What would you say “joining the politics of Jesus” is about?
12. What do you think of Claiborne’s voting advice summed up in the third to last paragraph above?