

## June Sermons

### “I Will Not Cease From Mental Fight”

#### **Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 19, 2019**

*Readings:* Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35; Psalm 148

*Sermon text:* I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. Revelation 21:1

This is the first of two sermons on faith and politics.

In Christ there is no east or west,  
in him no south or north,  
but one great fellowship of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.

So we sing. So we believe. But outside of Christ, outside of the vision of a heavenly holy city of all people and all creatures united in love—the mystic holy city of Jerusalem—in the world we live in, there is east and west, north and south, and very little fellowship of love.

How do we move from here to there? From the wars over the historical and present-day Jerusalem, to the city revealed to the author of the Revelation, whose final passages we read from this morning and will read from again next week?

The book of Revelation is a difficult work. It subverts the image of the New Testament as a peaceful, non-violent portrayal of the conquering love of God through the self-sacrifice of Christ that we see in the gospel accounts. In this book, the followers of the Slaughtered Lamb get even—and the four horsemen of the apocalypse wreak environmental catastrophe on the whole earth. Christ wars with Antichrist, the Lamb with the Beast. Rivers of blood flow and mighty Babylon is destroyed.

But then, finally, we finally get to chapters 21 and 22. We find peace and a remarkable vision of the consummation of the biblical vision. In the beginning God made heaven and earth; in the end they meet and marry. A heavenly Jerusalem descends like a bride adorned for a wedding—the wedding of heaven and earth, of Jerusalem and the Lamb. The walls are jeweled—and nothing unclean can enter. But the gates are always open, by day or by night, and the throne of God is in the middle, with the river of the waters of life flowing from it—the nations are healed by the medicinal leaves of the sheltering tree of life spreading along both banks.

We do not go up to heaven, heaven comes down to us. The old passes away, and a new creation is born. The peaceable kingdom is come; the feast on the mountain seen in Isaiah’s ancient vision begins.

Must we wait? Is there nothing to be done in the meantime (except build our survivalist shelters and hunker down and pray till the Reckoning)?

We get a more active lesson in kingdom-building from the account of Peter reaching out to the Gentiles in the 11th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Also a lesson in politics and rhetoric.

Have you ever tried to argue someone into agreeing with your politics or religion? Good luck with that. Doesn’t matter that you’ve had a revelation, a vision of the truth. “I have a dream” only works as an opening rhetorical move—a claim to speak with prophetic authority. It must be followed with something along the lines of Peter’s account of his visit to the household of the centurion Cornelius—the evidence of experience. The Holy Spirit descended upon those Gentiles just as it did upon us, the Jewish followers of the risen Messiah. How then can we deny them baptism? God has already baptized them with the Spirit. Would you fight God?

Of course, the issue of including Gentile believers in the Jewish sect of Jesus wasn’t settled because those present had no answer to that story. There were those who continued to believe that the covenant made with Abraham, and the biblical commandments given to Moses, the circumcision of males, and the rules of diet and custom, were not overturned because Jesus was indeed the true Messiah, King of the Jews. Paul still had a great deal of opposition to

his plan to include Gentiles in the church. But Peter and the other members of the apostolic council agreed that they need not conform to the Abrahamic covenant or follow the Mosaic law. They could simply abide by the original covenant made through Noah with all people after the flood. Abstain from murder, mistreatment of animals, and sexual immorality. The rest is the Way of Love, the new commandment given by Jesus—that we love one another as he loved us. Christians are not the new chosen people, but simply the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision of Zion (heavenly Jerusalem) as the light for the Gentiles—that is, an example and inspiration for inclusive love.

The politics of inclusion are hard. It is tempting and easy to use religion—a powerful binding set of beliefs—as a way to create a more unified Us, set in opposition to a wicked Them. The history of religion—including the religion begun under the name of Christ—is filled with lessons along these lines.

But the gospel, it seems to me, is clear. In Christ there is no east or west, north or south, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

So we must let go of religion and cling to the gospel. Let go of being chosen and elect, and affirm our role as suffering servant, wounded healer, forgiven sinner. We are not better, only more aware of the grace of God through the gospel of Christ in the unity of the Spirit of love.

The residents of the shining city on the hill shouldn’t pour out the gates to conquer, nor shut them against any late comers, but open them again and again, embracing those who climb the hill and seek to enter.

Where we do need to engage in struggle and strife is in the struggle against ignorance and injustice. Against the exploitation of labor, the mistreatment of children, the oppression of the weak by the strong. Through a politics of biblical idealism tempered in practice by the experience of the long march against slavery and racism, against misogyny and patriarchy, against homophobia and bullying. Injustice called out, confronted, and refused. But not using language that demonizes those who disagree, those who haven’t understood. We are also ignorant and sinful. We must be open to being called

out and confronted ourselves. This is not an easy way. But it is it seems to me, a gospel way.

William Blake, the great English poet and mystic of the early nineteenth century, wrote a remarkable poem as a preface to a longer work on Milton. It reads:

And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green:  
And was the holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here,  
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:  
Bring me my arrows of desire:  
Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold!  
Bring me my chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green & pleasant Land.

Yes we fight against the dark Satanic Mills that exploit our children and poison our earth. We fight for the kingdom of God—with weapons of desire and swords of Mental Fight. We do not simply await the second coming of Christ in a chariot of fire accompanied by avenging angels. No, we work right here and now, building Jerusalem in America's green and pleasant land. We will not cease from spiritual fight, nor turn from the guiding light of Christ.

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## “A Just and Lasting Peace”

### **Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 26, 2019**

*Readings:* Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 5:1-9; Psalm 67

*Sermon text:* Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:5

This is the second of two sermons on faith and politics.

Memorial Day—once known as Decoration Day—developed from the custom of decorating the graves of soldiers killed during the Civil War with late May flowers. It is now part of what sociologist Robert Bellah called the American “civil religion”—a set of customs and rituals, history and myths, that help unite us a people, using themes of unity, sacrifice and rebirth. America is perhaps unique in our civil religion’s emphasis on foundational documents—the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, as almost sacred texts. British writer G. K. Chesterton once said that the United States was “the only nation ... founded on a creed” and also coined the phrase “a nation with a soul of a church.”

Abraham Lincoln is one of the great saints of the American civil religion, at least outside of the South. The foundational pilgrimage of Memorial Day is the one he made to the battlefield of Gettysburg Pennsylvania. The Address he made that day is another of our sacred texts. It is commonly recited by a student during Memorial Day observances. These words are as familiar to Americans as any scripture:

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address is the second of his great texts in our American civil religion, inscribed together with the Gettysburg Address on the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall in Washington D.C.. It concludes:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

How can we honor and observe this great directive to “achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations”—a directive deeply in tune with and developed from Christian faith? It is a question well worth pondering on, especially in light of the fact that our shared set of binding beliefs and practices has become quite frayed of late...

Last week I spoke on the theme of faith and politics, observing that the book of Revelation pictured the end of this world—and the coming of a new one—as a marriage of heaven and earth. Heavenly Jerusalem descends to earth, to be the home God and the Lamb. We heard another part of that great conclusion to the Bible this morning. There is a vision of “the river of the water of life” flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. As it flows out into the city of Jerusalem “the tree of life” grows along both banks—with its twelve kinds of fruit and its leaves for the healing of nations. I am not sure what the twelve kinds of fruit are—but note there is a variety, different strokes for different folks. But for this morning’s reflection on working toward a just and lasting peace I would really like to understand how the leaves of the tree of life—the original tree in the midst of the Garden—heal (“bind up”) wounds among ourselves and with all nations. I suspect it has something to do with forming a common purpose around our shared life, our shared earth, and our common task to care for God’s creation.

Last week we also read a portion of the Acts of the Apostles in which Peter argued for the inclusion of Gentiles in the new covenant through Christ based on his experience of the household of Cornelius the Roman centurion receiving a baptism of holy Spirit. This morning we hear of Paul having a vision in a dream in which he is asked to make a journey to Macedonia, a Greek speaking nation. He goes with his team and preaches on the banks of a river to a group composed mostly of women doing the wash and saying prayers. Lydia, a merchant of purple cloth—a precious and expensive commodity then—receives the gospel message with joy and invites the

disciples to her house—she is clearly the head of a household as an independent businesswoman. Cornelius and Lydia thus personify Gentile inclusion. The inclusionary theme is set: the group of those who follow the Way of Jesus will not be a single nation but a transnational movement, across languages—Pentecost is that story—ethnicities and cultures. And so it has been.

I argued last week that this widening spiral of inclusion—this forming of an ever greater Us and a refusal to consider as demonic or outside the grace of God any people—Them—is characteristic of Christianity at its best. Of course it has not always been at its best. Sociologists also have observed that religions have both binding and a bridging functions, binding people into a unified Us and, also but not always, trying to find bridges to those outside, to include Them.

Love—the gospel message—love one another as I have loved you, as we heard last week—is to be the guiding principle. Hope—based on the resurrection and given form by revelation—is to orient us against despair in the face of a world deeply inclined to us versus them patterns of thinking and acting. Faith, a gift of the holy Spirit, of our formation as both children and adults, reinforced by reflection and continued prayer, keeps us moving along the Way.

The Way is one of healing and teaching and proclamation.

That's what Jesus did—and so what we must do. Proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God—superior to all earthly nations, however righteous and hallowed by blood and sacrifice and patriotic feeling. Teach that all the nations must learn to turn swords into plowshares, to understand and obey the golden rule, to realize that the interests of others are as compelling to them as ours to us. And heal. Heal the nations, heal our nation.

Someone recently pointed out that in the gospel accounts Jesus heals many times—but never the same way twice. In this morning's gospel account for instance, he helps a poor man paralyzed and unable to reach the sporadically bubbling waters of a healing bath for 38 years. Does he really want to get healed? Jesus asks him. Yes—so stand and walk—and he does. Jesus

convinced the man that he needn't rely on others to assist him to the water, and that he had the power to stand and walk. In many of his healing stories it takes a combination of Jesus' presence—the power of the holy Spirit—and the person's receptivity and faith. Healing in all of its forms needs the cooperation of God's will and human faith—just as in the Incarnation.

The takeaway point is that if we want to continue this great American experiment of self-government and work toward a more perfect union and a just and lasting peace we need both the power of God and the faith of the people.

Realism and history tell us the journey will be difficult, conflict inevitable, force required, even war at times may be justified—as I believe in our history it has been in order to achieve liberty through the War of Independence, end slavery through the Civil War, and defeat the common enemy of humanity in World War II. At other times we have engaged in wars of conquest or to defend commercial interests or to join allies whose reason for war—as in World War I—was deeply flawed and foolish. But in any case, let us remember with grateful hearts the price that was paid—and who paid it. We honor all who serve. But we must get better at defusing hostility before war, so that it may not come to that. To find ever new ways of healing old wounds and forming new bonds of affection. To help those who are down and have nothing to lose, so that the siren's song of populist demagogues will fail to divert the ship. To admonish those who have power and wealth, so that the course of state is not set by a technocratic elite unresponsive to the will of the people. God's will, as Lincoln knew, is beyond our understanding. But we can see the end of the journey. We have received a vision of a holy city where all nations dwell in peace. It needs neither temple nor capital, for all are fed and all are free and all are healed in the river of the water of life.

May God in Christ through the power of the holy Spirit guide us there. Amen.

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