

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church (via zoom)  
Pentecost Sunday 5/31/2020  
Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13, Acts 2:1-21  
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Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the church, as it is the day of remembrance of the gift of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus' first disciples. This small group of Christ followers needed the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to walk in the ways that Jesus had shown them. This fulfilled the promise God had made through the prophet Joel: to pour out God's Spirit on all people, men and women alike, Jews and Gentiles alike, slaves and free, people from every language and nation would be filled with God's spirit. When that happened, it we would be one body. And so on Pentecost, we give thanks for the birth of this body, the Body of Christ, the Church. Christians are those who follow the teachings of Jesus and carry on the work of Christ in the world, embodying the love of God for all, by the power of the Spirit.

These days, however, many are confused as to what Christians believe. When non-religious people are asked about Christians, more and more respond that Christians are hateful, bigoted, and cruel. Unfortunately, it is easy to think of examples of behaviors and policies supported by those who say they are Christian to reinforce this view. There is even a hate group called Christian Identity who assert that white people, not Jews are the true Israel favored by God. This would seem ludicrous if there were not a growing number of Americans who call themselves Christian, but who are really white nationalists.

Christian nationalism bears little resemblance to true Christianity. Instead of following the God of love, nationalism taps into fears and uncertainties and demonizes vulnerable minorities. The rise of Christian Nationalism in the United States has led to xenophobia and racism becoming more and more overt. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, in their book *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* point out that Christian nationalism works in a decidedly un-Christ-like manner by supporting policies that marginalize those who, through their beliefs or identity, don't conform to supposedly biblically ordained order that reverences the traditional family, militarism, tightly closed borders, and white, Protestant supremacy.

In the 1930s many Christian thinkers in Germany believed they should be allied with the new nationalism in that country. They believed that the National Socialist movement offered an opportunity to strengthen social order with a strong Christian identity. But some Christians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, immediately resisted and rejected the new "German" Christianity as a hideous distortion of the Gospel.

Christian nationalism is an oxymoron, you cannot be a nationalist and a Christian. Nationalism is not the same as patriotism. Where patriotism is love of one's country, the nationalism we see on the rise in America today has twisted that love into hatred of those who do not measure up to some false vision of America. Nationalists hold great animosity for many of their fellow Americans and hostility towards those who do not look or speak or think like themselves. Nationalism is the antithesis of the Gospel love for all people.

The group, Christians Against Christian Nationalism, released a statement debunking Christian nationalism and reminding all Americans of the importance of religious freedom. "Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian. It often overlaps with and provides cover for white supremacy and racial subjugation. We reject this damaging political ideology and invite our Christian brothers and sisters to join us in opposing this threat to our faith and to our nation."

It is time to reclaim Christianity from those who have distorted and exploited it. Jesus Christ identified himself with the poor, the imprisoned, the foreigner, and those in need of hospitality. In Matthew 25, we hear Jesus say, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' If people who claim to be Christians are revealing a spirit other than this, it is not a spirit from God. If people who claim to be Christians are committing or inciting violence against marginalized people, they are not filled with the spirit of God. If people who claim to be Christians ask that God bless only the United States of America, and too bad for the rest of the world, they are not filled with the spirit of God.

The body of Christ, the Church of God, is to look like the picture we heard this morning from the book of the Acts of the Apostles: filled with people from all countries and languages and customs, treating one another as the brothers and sisters in Christ that we are. So how can we tell who is truly a Christian? How can we tell if someone is following the Spirit of God?

First letter of John: Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. In today's reading from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of Paul to the Corinthians, We hear that one must be intentional in discerning what is from God: what Paul calls distinguishing between spirits. Paul tells the Corinthians the way to tell if something is from God is that the people of God are given spiritual gifts for the common good. For the common good. The best way to determine that an action or policy or attitude is in line with the gospel is if it fulfills what Jesus called the greatest

commandment: To love God with all our heart and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That is, if it has the good of all people at its core.

In closing, I share a prayer from our bishops in a statement this week. God, who can turn our worries into wings of joys and our sorrows into songs of thanks, let not our hearts be so troubled by the tragedies of this life's moment that we lose sight of the eternal life in your kingdom. Give comfort and solace to our companions who suffer almost unbearable losses every second, minute, and hour in our nation and world. Strengthen our resolve to replace hatred with love, tension with trust, and selfishness with caring and community. Heal, O God, all our children so that those who hate and those who are hated, those who hurt and those who are hurt, may grow up in an America and in a world of peace, opportunity, and justice. Amen.

*Marian Wright Edelman, Guide My Feet, Prayers and Meditations for Our Children, p. 142 (modified)*