

A God of Empire?

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen, August 5th, 2018

Readings: From *Reading the Bible on the Margins* (Miguel de la Torre); The Gospel of John, 6:24 – 34

One of the featured human interest stories last month in the Washington Post was an article entitled “God, Trump, and the Meaning of Morality.” It featured interviews with churchgoers in the small town of Luverne, Alabama, a predominantly white, self-described evangelical Christian town that was chosen for this story because they reflect the demographic of American evangelicals, who overwhelmingly voted for an unlikely candidate in the last presidential election. The people of Luverne sat down with journalist Stephanie McCrummen to discuss their feelings about the perceived dissonance between the current president’s behavior and values, and their Christian faith. So: I had a lot of trouble getting through this story. As a person of faith, specifically Christian faith, I found myself frankly shocked at what I read from the mouths of other people who also identify with Jesus’ ministry and teachings. 82-year-old Jewell Killough said she believed that God is using Trump to save America. As a Southern Baptist, Killough is devoted to behavioral morality, such as abstinence before marriage, not smoking and drinking, fidelity to one’s significant other. Yet when questioned about the behavior of the president, she responded, “I think they’re trying to frame him,” referring to “liberals” who were trying to undermine God’s agenda for America, a great battle that she perceived between God and Satan. Killough was looking forward to heaven, she said, and believes that this is a sign ushering in the “end times.”

This was rather mild compared to the other interviews. Brett and Misty Crum expressed discomfort with the president’s hate language, as they feel that all people should be treated as God’s holy creations, yet they also figured if they’re somehow wrong about supporting him in the end, it “doesn’t really matter, because a true Christian doesn’t have to worry about that,” meaning they are saved and will wind up in the glory land no matter what. One parishioner blamed Hillary Clinton for “hating people who believe in God and the Second Amendment,” though my extreme curiosity about how God and the Second Amendment could possibly be conflated was not followed up on, alas. And then there were Sheila and Linda, old friends from childhood, who declared that America is moving toward the annihilation of Christians, and that former president Obama was “acting at the behest of the Islamic nation.” “Love thy neighbor,” Sheila quickly pointed out, means “love thy *American* neighbor. Welcome the stranger means welcome the *legal* immigrant stranger.” But perhaps my breath was most sharply knocked out of me at her following statements: “the Bible says, ‘if you do this to the least of these, you do it to me,’” she said, referring of course to Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Matthew regarding the most vulnerable members of society. “But the least of these are *Americans*, not the ones crossing the border.” Perhaps I should have been more prepared at this point, when she followed up with her concern about racial division, her thoughts on our slave legacy and the so-called “religious war” we’re in: “Slaves were valued,” she said. “They got housing. They got fed. They got medical care.”

This is nothing other than profoundly disturbing. It also may be a fairly extreme version of examples from smaller, rural white communities in this country, even for the south. But it points to something much bigger, a systemic problem that even the pastor of

the First Baptist Church, Clay Crum, isn't fully grappling with: while he spoke candidly with McCrummen about his terrible disappointment in the president and feeling ill at ease preaching a series on the 10 Commandments to his congregation when he himself hated the hypocrisy he saw in his own church leaders growing up, he still concluded that the president was an immoral person doing what he considered moral things. Conservative judges; antiabortion policies. And come Sunday, when McCrummen sat in worship to hear him preach on adultery, she wondered if he would end the sermon with some thread that connected the immorality of this person who the congregation practically worshipped as they did God, a congregation that Crum led in the Pledge of Allegiance on American holidays, with the bible that they declared that they were also allegiant to. But he decided not to. He may every day wonder whether this president might not be an instrument of God, but still he is convinced that one or two issues that he was raised to believe are wildly important to God are enough to turn a blind eye to every other despotic nightmare wrought under this leadership.

As much as I felt nauseous reading this story, it sparked a flame within me, a desire to further connect the dots between what I call imperial Christianity – the Christianity of American imperialism and colonialism – and white conservative America. We're all reading the same book, but how have we come to so great a chasm in our lenses? How has the politics of Jesus become conflated so grotesquely with the politics of empire, of oligarchs who, if writing today, the gospel authors would identify as Caesar and his lackeys, the same political machine that their messiah gave his life to resist?

Miguel de la Torre, who as you know is one of my favorite theologians, points to the divide for white evangelical communities. De la Torre's theological work primarily engages how the Bible is read and used depending on whether you come from the center of society, or, as he describes, the margins. The center, as he concludes in our context, means the center of power structures and thus is a white, Euro-American, male-driven center through which most white evangelicals have inherited their religious lens. Since he served both congregations of color as well as white rural evangelical populations, he came to see that the major difference between the theologies was that while communities of color tended to read Jesus' ministry concretely, white communities read it metaphorically. For example, when Jesus walks into the temple in the Gospel of Luke, opens the Hebrew scriptures and reads from Isaiah, "the spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," those reading from the margins hear this as literal, which in the context of Isaiah's ministry, it was; those in the center hear it as an abstraction. The poor become "the poor in spirit," not poor as in impoverished. "Release to the captives" becomes those who are enslaved in the prison of their own minds. The blind become those who haven't found God in their hearts, and freedom for the oppressed is about an individual journey toward loving God, or professing salvation, or any number of other spiritualized ideas that ignore the systemic suffering caused by structural injustice, within a society rife with corruption ruled by a small and affluent group. The irony is pretty glaring, in my opinion, but as de la Torre discovered, how can a community of people whose lifestyles have historically benefitted from such structures read the text through the eyes of the Jesus of Galilee, a ghetto, the barrio, who was born poor and brown and without a home?

Many who subscribe to what is now called “progressive Christianity” scratch their heads and wring their hands wondering how the faith could become so hypocritical. But the minute that Christianity was claimed by Constantine our answer becomes much clearer. A general in a family of military, Constantine took his visions to a nearby bishop of a Christian sect who included the Old Testament in their sacred texts, and the bishop understandably interpreted the visions in light of the military might of the kings of Israel and Judah. Once Christianity went from the margins to the center under the Roman Empire, it had to be interpreted and practiced through the lens of militarization, conquest, power-grabbing. As Brown University religious studies scholar Shaye Cohen puts it, “since this branch of Christianity included the story about historical Israel as part of its own redemptive history, it had an entire language for articulating the relationship of government and piety.” With that model, Constantine secured and legitimized a kind of theology of government to justify the secular power-grabbing that had long taken place among emperors prior, only now through the lens of Jesus as messiah, not the emperors themselves.

With this in mind, the imperializing of Christianity seemed practically inevitable. And it is stories such as the ones we heard last week and this that can easily play directly into a theology of empire that justifies trampling those on the margins and reifying the structures that Jesus spent his entire ministry trying to dismantle. This particular gospel, the gospel of John, is wildly different from the other three in canon, Matthew, Mark and Luke – as you may remember John was the latest gospel written among the four that became canonized, it was written in Greek, and it utilized a genre of Hellenistic writing that would have been familiar to pagan religious followers. John has been used as the proof-texting gospel, the one that believers in Christ will point to as proof that Jesus was not only a divine figure, but the only one to worship on the way to God. Yet Jesus’ many statements about himself in this work, beginning with “I am,” “I am the bread of life...I am the good shepherd...I am the resurrection and the life,” are not found in any other gospels, but are found in other Hellenistic writings of deities like Horus and Isis. In this context, the writer of John quite purposely uses the same truth claims of other revealer gods by offering an alternative in the figure of Jesus that would legitimize who he was amidst many others who had come before him. The trouble is, once Jesus became legitimized through Constantine and the military might of the new Roman Empire became a sign of Jesus’ divine power, the stage was set. Jesus of the ghetto, the Nazarean, the Jewish carpenter, who healed those that Jewish law deemed unclean, who socialized with tax collectors and prostitutes alike, who preached more about money and its corruption than any other subject, this Jesus who gave explicit instructions about how people ought to be treated and cared for so that no human system could deny them life abundant, was already erased. Replaced with a Jesus whose ministry to those on the margins was an afterthought, anecdotal and unimportant in the grand scheme of a great savior of the human soul, disconnected from social ills and the inequalities of an imperial regime.

It is easy to read Jesus’ statements about himself in this passage in a way that gives us permission to turn from the human-created ills in our wounded world. And a part of our souls need this ability to lean upon a God who says, come to me, all you who are weary and seek rest. I am the living water; I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry; whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But it’s that tricky word *believe* that has divided our images of who Jesus was or is with what he concretely did and asked his

followers to do. This word for believe, *pistyeuw*, occurs 98 times in the Gospel of John, more than any other gospel. It means just what we think it means: to think to be true, to be persuaded of, to credit, to place confidence in. In this gospel, it also includes “to trust in Jesus or God as able to aid either in obtaining or doing something.” It’s this part of the definition that reminds us that to prioritize belief over action is a dangerous path toward ignoring the critical work that Jesus does in this and the three other gospels, and toward appropriating his divinity to fit the mold of just about anything we want him to be – including an emperor, who plunders, enslaves, divides, and annihilates that which doesn’t serve his personal agenda. Jesus has served as a path toward personal redemption for many – from addiction, from depression, from anxiety, from abuse. He’s served as the path toward societal redemption for all – from poverty, from sickness, from a lack of life abundant. What Jesus has never been, is a God of Empire. As de la Torre writes, “if a biblical interpretation leads to the death of a segment of society, we can assume that such a reading is nonbiblical in the sense that it does not describe the will of God. If the message of Christ is one that brings abundant and eternal life, then any message that fosters death is a message from the Antichrist.” These are powerful words that he does not use lightly, because they are derived from the life-giving ministry of the Child of Humanity who came into the world amidst the powerless, to relieve hungry bellies, to provide shelter for those left outside the palace walls, to redistribute the excesses of a few to the needs of the many - and for anyone to deny this as primary to Jesus’ ministry and character is to deny the gospel itself.

In a way, I understand the faith of the folks in Luverne, Alabama. I understand that they see their country through the eyes of a community that is homogenous, a community far removed from the various cultures living on top of each other in Asia Minor under Caesar, or even the various cultures living on top of each other here in our neighborhood and in our urban cities across America. I can understand that their Jesus looks like them, thinks like them, was born out of the Protestant work ethic that assumes survival of the fittest, and wants them to shop so the economy thrives. I can understand it because it’s a little bit easier than actually living the faith that Jesus embodied; it’s easier than considering that people are children of God no matter what their gender or sexual identity is, and no matter what nation they represent. And better put, to consider their child of Godness *because* of their identity. It’s easier to ignore the Canaanite woman. Or the Samaritan at the well. It’s so much easier. But it isn’t right. And we must continue to strive toward something better. A simple conversation, starting with, “That hasn’t been my experience. Can you explain what you mean?” or “That’s interesting that you feel that way. Can I share with you my experience, or can I share with you my understanding of this text?” Our belief systems are a vital source of life for who we are, and shape how we move through the world. But as we have seen and are seeing, they cannot be divorced from the lived reality of how we treat others on a systemic, communal, national and international level. Let us continue to open pathways back to Jesus, to the Jesus of Galilee, whose compassion knows no ends, whose fellowship does not covet, whose essence includes both internal belief and sustained action. Let us repair the breach that divides “I am the bread of life,” with “I am sent to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to free the oppressed.” Let us bridge the gap by saying no to a God of Empire, and yes to the God of the good news. Let us declare yes, we will be a part of your call and declare the Year of the Lord’s favor.