



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST — SEPTEMBER 30, 2018  
NUMBERS 11:4-6, 10-16. 24-29; PSALM 19:7-14; JAMES 5:13-20; MARK 9:38-50

## RELIGION AND POLITICS

**Mark 9:38-50** [John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. “For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

After the Emperor Constantine, declared in the year 313 that Christians should have the right to practice their religion freely, there was a melding of sorts between politics and the Christian religion.

No longer threatened with persecutions the rolls of Christianity swelled. Some had more commitment to this way than others...

Many in the Roman army – soldiers found it politically expedient to become Christian as well, stepping into their baptismal waters, but with a hedge.

These soldiers would hold their sword hand out of the waters of baptism as they went under—the hand would not be baptized so they thought, since it would continue in its chief purpose of waging war.

Even Constantine hedged in his faith by postponing his baptism until years later as he approached his death. He did so, so that he could continue his worldly ways of power, unbaptized.

It is said that while Constantine was about the work of building the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem over the presumptive site of Jesus' crucifixion, he took the nails from the supposed cross of Christ and melted them down to fit a bridle for his war horse—a Christian horse for a Christian emperor waging war with Christian symbols on his armor. It stops us short, doesn't it?

Centuries later, we incline to the horror at such misguided appropriations of our religious ancestors who saw fit to intermingle religion and politics to serve their purposes using bizarre and really troublesome rationalizations along the way.

Fast forward then to the year 1774, and at the inaugural session of the First Continental Congress laying the groundwork of what would become this nation; there was a call to prayer at the beginning of the first day. Mr. Duche, a delegate from South Carolina who happened to be an Episcopal priest also, was cited to begin his prayer. He tapped Psalm 35 at the opening: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me..."

A dangerous appropriation of scripture that seemed to suggest that scripture is partisan

when it most certainly is not. Sam Adams of Massachusetts, writing home to his beloved Abigail, reported that Mr. Duche then "struck out into extemporaneous prayer which filled the bosom of every man present." And then they got on with their work.

In summoning a divine blessing upon their cause of freedom, religion and politics were intermingled that day... and have been in this nation every day since.<sup>1</sup>

In the early days of the American Civil War, a more pensive Abraham Lincoln welcomed a group of northern Christian clergymen to the White House. One among them reportedly said how great it was to have God on our side in the war, which prompted Lincoln to admonish the minister that we should not be so arrogant as to think God on our side; rather, we should fervently pray that we are on God's side.

This past week we have been horrified once more at the heart-wrenching ways our political leaders have used their power to score political points at the great expense of others. It is a tragic example of power run amok, and while we are not a Christian nation, most of the people we watched bully and beat up on others are Christian, and the image that has remained with me all week is of them holding their hands out of their baptismal waters.

Secular politics in our nation has become a zero-sum game, a tribal melee, of us versus

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<sup>1</sup> Meacham, Jon. *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. New York: Random House. 2006. p. 64.

them. In which one can seemingly only measure victory for one's self by ensuring another must lose, and no one, no one, is apparently safe from the perilous aim of rationalized political scorekeeping.

It was theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1944, when the outcome of World War II was anything but certain, the theologian said: "Man's capacity [sic] for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."<sup>2</sup>

And it feels to many of us these days, that our democracy might just not hold in the face of such ripened hostility that justifies the vilification of victims of sexual assault for Machiavellian theater. It makes no sense.

It leaves us wondering what possible hope is there for our children who witness our leaders behave so ignominiously? What messages are we sending them?

And yet, into this milieu of our desolate bewilderment comes one who gave his life to invite us into a different way. And alongside all of these horrors playing out this past week in Washington, I have been wrestling this week also with this passage from Mark's gospel wherein Jesus uses hyperbole to get our attention. They are dreadful images—lopping off hands and feet, plucking out eyes, making millstone pendants for ourselves and then go jumping in the sea... all better than causing "little ones to stumble." Than causing "little ones to stumble." It's a phrase that requires some unpacking.

The Greek word "little ones" translated here, μικρῶν (Mikron), echoes Jesus' recent holding a child in his arms and then he broadens that meaning of not just children, but all who are marginalized in society, in his time and in ours and in our time that could mean children, it could mean women, it could mean people of color, it could be refugees, or immigrants, or those with non-heteronormative identify or orientation. The list can go on and on, but Jesus said he came to serve, not to be served, and he is speaking of these when he said I came to serve. We would do well to espouse the same worldview. There is no place for holding our hand out of the proverbial waters of mercy for those who are victimized by the powers and principalities of this world. There is no place for it.

And the notion of "causing one to stumble" the Greek verb here, σκανδαλίση (skandalise), from which we get our word scandalous. Literally it means causing one to fall; causing one to trip; tripping someone or trapping someone, and underneath that you get the graphic consequences are imbedded in it all—the broken skin, the fleshy wounds, the pain, and the fear. It is scandalous because it is disgraceful. It is disgraceful because it is evil.

If the scandal of this week has traumatized you or retraumatized you, I stand in this pulpit, in this church and I say today with you, to you, I am deeply sorry for that. I long

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<sup>2</sup> Meacham, Jon. *The Soul of America: The Battle for our Better Angels*. New York: random House, 2018. p. 10.

for the day when our nation will, as Lincoln once wrote, be touched again by the better angels of our nature. That is not today, but I know that day will come.

Please know that you are not alone, and this community, while imperfect, strives to be about the work of healing and wholeness for all. We want this to be a safe place for you, for all people who have been wounded by the wiles of patriarchal power. I want every one of you to know that, in this era of #MeToo, this church is committed to creating safe spaces for you to share your stories. In the coming weeks, clergy will unfold some ideas and ways that we can do that together in wholesome and safe ways. In the meantime, I encourage any of you to speak to one of the clergy if you want to be heard. We will hear you, we will hold the space for you.

And if you are on the other end of Jesus' words this morning, hearing them spoken to you as admonition, as a person of power or privilege, or even just as disciples, then let these words serve as a wake-up call to you and me; a wake-up all that we are invited to do it differently. Own your action. Turn to a new way. Let go of whatever is in your hand and be fully down into your waters of baptism. If you will, if we will, the world will unfold in new life-giving ways.

It was Martin Luther King, Jr., who just six days before he was murdered in this nation, delivered his final Sunday sermon, calling for us all to work together for a new day, a new way of being. Even in the end, he was holding hope and he said what our nation needs most

are *“dedicated individuals who are willing to be the co-workers with God... the co-workers with God, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice... truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.”*

Can you hear his words echoing 50 years later? Into our space today, there is this desperate need, even today, the need for people who will be co-workers with God, which is why this church stands... co-workers with God, why it is and designed as a beacon of hope on the hill, a gathering place for people holding fervently to the ideal of a better world, because God is calling us into that. It exists so that we might proclaim that God's values of mercy and justice and love have meaning and purpose in our time, they must have meaning and purpose in our time, and in our lives.

*Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.*

That is the promise of the resurrected Christ who has gathered up all the pain of creation and offers healing balm to it all, to your soul.

*Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.*

This is the reality of life lived along that arc of the moral universe.

*Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.*

This is the hope we embody here, together, broken as we all may be, because we believe there is yet goodness in this world and in all humanity, goodness worth holding onto and working for.

*Truth, crushed to earth, will rise again.*