

Proper 8C-1

Morning Prayer

SCOTUS decision against Federal abortion rights

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” So, stand firm; do not submit to the powers of empire (Gal. 5:1), powers that seek to control you for their own gains, powers already consumed by self-indulgence and the desires of the flesh.

“What the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh.”(v.17)

The ways of God are not the ways of the World. And the World’s ways are not God’s ways.

Those who are led by the Spirit, those who live according to God’s ways, need not fear being held to account by the law.

Whose law? God’s law? Caesar’s law? What law is this of which Paul is speaking?

In this letter of Paul's to the churches of Galatia, Paul is doing what Paul does — hoping to help burgeoning communities of followers of Jesus' Way figure out just what that means.

How is the way the church in Galatia is called to live now different from the way its members were living before? How is the community supposed to square the way those who having been living their life according to Torah with the lives of the community's members who joined the flock from outside Torah? The questions and conflicts were many, as would be expected; the big conundrum at hand, to which Paul dedicates the previous section of this letter was, of course, the question of circumcision.

As we have heard in previous weeks, after Jesus' death, Christ's resurrection, and the lighting of faith's fire in the hearts of many on Pentecost, when the disciples undertook their mission to continue in Jesus' ministry *they were not* also gifted a clear road map and *Book of Standard Operating Procedures*.

No, in mentoring these new communities to whom he writes, Paul is doing his best to work out for himself what it means to live like Jesus *without Jesus* while trying to stay a few steps ahead of his mentees.

As any of you who have ever been in a position to coach, teach, mentor, or parent knows — that whole staying one step ahead thing is a tenuous balance, at best.

So what do we do? What do we do when the need to coach or model is moving faster than we, ourselves, have yet figured out?

Well, we might pray — which is always a good starting place. Barring any lightening bolt epiphany from God, we hold fast to that about which we are the most sure, the most certain, that which is ir-resectable from the depths of our knowledge, our heart.

For Paul, this ir-resectable truth is God calls us — commands us — to love one another as we would love ourselves.(v.14b)

When we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, we follow God's command; it is said, we live by the Spirit.

When we instead allow our self-indulgent (rather than Spirit-led) desires to dictate our actions, we are living according to the flesh.

Paul's specific cajoling of the Galatians has to do with a weak spot they seem to have when it comes to sin involving interpersonal relationships. For Paul, abuse of the freedoms given to us through Christ fall into four groups: sexual impurity, idolatry, dissension, and intemperance.

It is the Galatian church's proclivity for dissension which most gravely concerns Paul. He believes there is the real possibility that the Galatians may destroy each other through their mutual (metaphorical, of course) "biting and devouring" (v. 15). This is not the first time he has brought the implications of their behavior to their attention; they are well aware (or

should be) that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (v. 21).

It ought not escape our attention that these Christians, so concerned with the matter right law-keeping, have fallen into behavior which blatantly contradicts their faith.

The Galatian's emphasis on the flesh—literally, through circumcision, but also more simply, through their focus on self-determination—led them indeed to perform the works of the flesh in another sense: idolatry, sorcery, enmities, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy. Our efforts to please God in our own strength result only in behavior which creates distance of our own making between us and God.

Paul's letters can be helpful when we are trying to figure out what it means, what it looks like, and how to live in Jesus-following Christian community. And, like any Scripture, we are right to pay attention to the whole picture being described for us, and to protect against mis-interpreting for lack of context.

At some point in time, this reference to living according to the flesh became narrowly interpreted by some as pertaining to any bodily desire or craving. This understanding, being further oversimplified, led to the belief that bodily desires and cravings are inherently sinful. The resulting course of action then became to deny any pleasure for pleasure's sake.

Voices claiming to speak for all Christians have further applied this interpretation to specifically target sexual desire. The only “acceptable” sexual act being that which was procreative in aspiration. It then follows that the act of abortion would be unthinkable. This makes any non-procreative sexual act — and particularly homosexual sex — sinful.

What this understanding misses is *God made this material world and called it good*. God didn't have to create a world that includes turquoise seas, breathtaking sunsets or magnificent mountains, but God did. God did because God wants us to experience the sheer pleasure that is given to us by awe-inspiring beauty.

God made our bodies and called *them* good, created in God's own likeness, even! Our bodies would get us from Point A to Point B—and even reproduce just fine without the ability to feel pleasure—God didn't have to make our bodies feel pleasure: the taste of sun-warmed fruit or the sound of rain or the feeling of another person's caress. But God did because God wants us to experience the sheer pleasure derived by that body.

Pleasure is not inherently sinful, no more so than power is not inherently sinful. It is the continued overindulgence that draws us from the Spirit's path and leads us to the way of sin.

If what I have had to say has made you feel uncomfortable — either because it speaks of actual bodies or because it feels to you to have strayed outside of the lane of the preacher, let us be clear:

The gospels proclaim the Kingdom of the Reign of God; *this is political*. Jesus preached the vision of a healed Creation, where the Kingdom of God was real, manifest in our daily lives through gratitude, sharing, and forgiveness; a table of friends who formed a new body of kinship, a share-community, that undoes class, gender, race and ethnicity.

Jesus preached about the ultimate jubilee: the freeing of captives and releasing of slaves, when all debts would be canceled, and all people living in a community of peacemaking, grace, collaboration, and freedom; beloved community, living in right relationship with one another.

And when we proclaim, with Jesus, abolition of prisons, the cancellation of debts, the end of slavery, and all people dwelling in harmony and peace, *we are talking politics*. The kind of politics that involve transformed hearts and acts of mercy in the name of embodying and manifesting for the larger world the first petition of the Lord's Prayer: *Your kingdom come*.

For decades, most of us, here, now, have largely had the privilege to risk little in going about this in our daily lives. It has become clear that in the coming days, months, and years we can no longer sit comfortably in that privilege. We are being called to choose the world we are to live in and to do our part bring it about.

Which world is it that we want to live in? Jesus', "a share-community that creates community from the bottom up, [or that of Empire,] a greed-community established from the top down?"¹

The discomfort that arises for many of us from the preaching of Gospel politics does not stem from the message itself, but from Christianity's long history of wrongly interpreting the Kingdom of God "as a top-down hierarchy of power and authority, built on a rigid social order, [] headed by godly men".²

A top down, socially rigid hierarchy in which so-called/self-identified godly men hold ultimate power and authority is not a description of God's Reign; it is, quite clearly, a description of the Roman Empire — the world in which Jesus lived and against which he preached resistance.

The discomfort that arises in the politics of the Gospels comes from the mistake of holding Jesus Christ as a new Caesar to whom obedient citizenship on earth will be rewarded with eternal life in heaven. This is not the Kingdom of God.

Make no mistake. The injustices carried out in the America's highest court this week were not rooted in Christian faith or doctrine, but in interest of the misogynistic, homophobic, racist demons of Empire.

¹ John Dominic Crossan. *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*. HarperOne: New York, NY (2008).

² Diana Butler Bass. The Cottage, *The Kingdom Heresy* (June 23, 2022). https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-kingdom-heresy?s=w&utm_medium=web . Last accessed, June 25, 2022.

In baptism in the Episcopal Church, we have made a covenant with God to love our neighbors as ourselves and to respect the dignity of every human being, seeking and serving Christ in all persons.

The Bible contains the stories of people trying to work out what it mean and how to live as God's people — whether we be Jews or Gentiles. But some things remain consistent: Personal and bodily autonomy is biblical. Weapons are to be beaten into plowshares, not carried on our persons for public display.

For those of us who have lost our way or who were led down wrong paths from early on, God promises forgiveness of sins, mercy, and grace.

May we *all* strive to do the same.

Amen.

The Rev. Lauren Sayre Lukason

June 26, 2022

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA (with Recording)

Final Blessing — *Franciscan*

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really CAN make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

And the blessing of God the Supreme Majesty and our Creator, Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word, and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate and Guide, be with you and remain with you, this day and always. Amen.