



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“What America Needs from Christians”

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Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

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Modern Worship Service

Today we close out our month-long focus on the BE Campaign: be just, be kind, be humble. As we rapidly approach election day, we recognize that our nation has become deeply divided and the polls are increasingly contentious. Our democracy is under threat and our political systems have been hijacked. Nonsense is the new common sense and many of us are left reeling with nothing feeling certain anymore. How did we get here? How do we get to a place that is better, healthier, and thriving for all people? I wish we had a three-step process that could get us out of this mess, but it took more than three steps for us to get where we are.

In a time of political polarization and increasing division, what does America need from Christians, particularly when Christians are oftentimes part of the problem? The goal of the BE Campaign is to make our community and world more like the Kingdom of God. We believe that what God requires of us is simple: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. I said simple, not easy. And yet, we believe that we can love our neighbors well and reclaim these three essential practices. This is what America needs from us: justice, kindness, and humility.

Just in case you were wondering, yes, we are talking about politics in church today. Yes, I realize that might make you uncomfortable. No, we will not be promoting one political party over another. I am not going to tell you who you need to vote for on Election Day. But we need to talk politics and how our faith influences them. Politics are not as scary as we make them out to be. The word politics comes from the Greek *polis*, meaning city, or *politikia*, meaning the affairs of cities. Broadly speaking, politics are the activities associated with the organization and governance of people. Ideally, it is how we partner together for the flourishing of humanity and the world.

I have heard on several occasions that “the gospel is not political” or “Jesus was not political.” Jesus and the gospel do not fit neatly into our political parties, nor are they intended to. But do not be mistaken. Jesus and the gospel are incredibly political. In fact, his first recorded words in the Gospel of Mark are “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom. Change your hearts and live, and trust this good news!” Jesus was not killed because he was a mere annoyance to the Roman authorities, he presented a real political threat. Jesus presented a new politics, a new ethic, on how we should live. Jesus came with a particular mission in mind, which is revealed in Luke 4. One day Jesus stood up to read in the synagogue. He read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, which said, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*”

As followers of Christ, this is our mission, too. We are called to continue the work and ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. At the end, we will not be asked how well we articulated or defended our theology. Rather, did we feed the hungry and give a drink to the thirsty? Did we welcome the stranger? Did we clothe the naked? Did we take care of the sick and visit those in prison? When we decide to follow Jesus Christ, everything we do must fall under his lordship. We are quick to confess Jesus as our savior, but it takes a lot more effort to align our hearts and lives with the way of Jesus. If Jesus is Lord, then our allegiance to him takes precedence over our allegiance to our country.

Which brings us to the discussion of what America needs from Christians. For a start, let’s be clear about what America doesn’t need from Christians. America doesn’t need us to have our identity as Christians wrapped up into our citizenship in America. We need to be incredibly clear about where our allegiance lies. We can absolutely be patriotic. It is a good thing to love your country. Patriotism is a good thing because it is a recognition of God’s good creation and helps us appreciate our place within it. Our loyalty and love for one particular area of God’s creation compel us to cultivate and improve the part we live in. We can be Christian and love our country, and part of that love includes working to improve our country by critiquing it and working to make it better for everyone. However, over the past several years there has been an increase in something under the guise of patriotism that is much more nefarious: nationalism.

Nationalism is the belief that humanity can be divided up into mutually distinct, internally coherent cultural groups defined by shared traits like language, religion, ethnicity, or culture. With this belief system, the role of the government

is to promote and protect a nation's cultural identity. As Christians, we can unfortunately take it one step further into Christian nationalism, which is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity and that the government must take steps to keep it that way. Going even further, it "refers to an ideology that asserts all civic life in the U.S. should be organized according to a particularly conservative and ethnocentric expression of Christianity."¹

Christian nationalism privileges the white, Christian experience. Christian nationalism does not want a government for the people, by the people. Essentially, a democracy. Instead, Christian nationalism wants a government for politically and religiously conservative white Christian Americans, by politically and religiously conservative white Christian Americans. In all of this, I am not saying it is a bad thing to be a politically and religiously conservative white Christian American. Many of us fit that description. The problem is when American identity becomes inextricably linked to Christianity. Christian nationalism is exclusionary, treats other people as second class, and does not respect the religious liberties of other people. It is marked by fear and the desire for power and control, often achieved through violent means. The January 6th insurrection is an example of Christian nationalism, with the interweaving of the cross and the American flag, with violence and acts of terror to achieve their goal.

I should not need to say this but I am going to say it anyway: Christian nationalism is not a faithful expression of the gospel. In fact, it flies in the face of the gospel. It is abhorrent and wrong. Following Jesus is not about gaining power, control, or making your religion the law of the land. Christian nationalism distorts the Christian faith and is a threat to religious communities and our democracy. "Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities... 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."² This is not in alignment with the gospel. This is not what America needs from Christians.

If you are anything like me, you get frustrated by other Christians who blatantly support Christian nationalism. It makes all of us look bad and we sometimes get lumped into one broad group. Although incredibly frustrating, despair is not the answer. Here we come to what America needs from Christians. We know what America does not need, so what does it need? I am utterly convinced that the words of Micah 6:8 are exactly what America needs from Christians. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" America needs for us to fearlessly contend for justice, to be immensely kind, and to walk in humility. There are other things America needs, for sure, but if we can get these three right, we will be well on our way.

America needs us to do justice. One of the problems with Christian nationalism is that it promotes and perpetuates racism, antisemitism, and a whole host of other "isms." It fosters and encourages fear of the other. We cannot stand back and watch while Black, Indigenous, and people of color are marginalized and oppressed. We cannot turn our eyes away from the acts of violence happening to our Jewish siblings. We cannot allow the harassment and mistreatment of the LGBTQIA+ community. And this is just a select sampling of the injustice that happens in America on a daily basis. It runs rampant. We have the biblical command to do justice. Proverbs 31:8-9 reads "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and poor." As Christians, we have the responsibility to recognize injustice and to speak out when it happens. And we must continually remember that God's justice is not like our justice. While our sense of justice is typically retributive, God's justice is based on reconciliation, restoration, and grace.

America needs us to be kind. We cannot keep getting away with saying and doing whatever we want as if they have no consequence. Our words and actions matter. As Christ-followers kindness is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at work within us. It goes beyond the surface-level of nice, which can often be insincere. Kindness comes from deep within. There is already too much rude, unkind rhetoric going around. We have the opportunity to speak differently. This does not mean we do not tell the truth when it needs to be told, but we choose to go about it in a way that is kind and leaves the door open for continued conversation and relationship. How can you show kindness this week? Being kind is a conscious choice that makes a big impact. We never know what is going on beneath the surface of the people in front of us. Choose to be kind, even when we disagree with someone. Kindness goes a long way.

America needs us to be humble. Following Jesus is not about gaining control and power. Christianity is not about wielding power over others and demanding a privileged place in the public sphere. We follow in the path of a crucified Christ, who had the heart of a servant and did not grasp at power even though it was rightfully his. Jesus' ministry was marked

¹ <https://time.com/6214724/christian-nationalism-threats-united-states/>

² <https://www.christiansagainstchristiannationalism.org/statement>

by humility and a heart for others. When we choose to walk humbly with God, we set aside our own selfish ambition, conceit, and pride. We do not strive to make our group the best or fiercely guard our place. We take advantage of the opportunity to learn about other cultures and religions without fear. We give others the chance to have a primary place. Walking humbly with God requires a shift in mindset, heart, and actions so that they align with God's. We must have the mind of Christ, have God's heart for the marginalized, and act in ways that align with the gospel.

We have an opportunity before us. While America might not want much from us these days, we have the chance to make it right. For as many ways that we have gotten it wrong, the church has gotten it right. I think of early Methodists and the schools, the hospitals, and the orphanages they built and sustained. We have a history of transforming lives for the better. The church not for ourselves, but for others. We participate in the work and mission of Christ in the world. We follow in Jesus' example of bringing good news to the poor, liberating the oppressed, and setting free those who are bound by systems or despair. We embody hope. Everybody needs hope. It is what helps us to hold on and roots us in the promise of a brighter, better future. We live our lives in such a way that people will know that there is a God who loves them. We are signposts pointing the way to the transformation, healing, and hope we find in God.

I am deeply rooted in hope and yet, I still have those days when I should be better about my boundaries around social media and news outlets. You know what I mean- you read something tragic and devastating and divisive and all you want to do is curl up on the floor in the fetal position or lay your head down on your desk and lament for a while. However, even on my more cynical days, when it feels like nothing will improve and everything is hopeless, I am still deeply convinced that God sees us, hears us, is present with us, and will make a way. Does not mean that the way will be easy, in fact, the way of Jesus is rarely easy. Look where it got him! God has told us what is required of us. God has shown us God's way: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. We walk in that way because we deeply believe in the transforming power of God to change hearts and lives, to transform our communities and nation. So do not lose hope. We still have a ways to go, but we are following in the footsteps of one who did justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly. It is our turn. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Amen.