

St. Luke's UMC  
October 13, 2024

*Do Unto Others Campaign*

***Is Christian Nationalism a Threat to the Golden Rule?***  
**John 18:36; Luke 4:18-19; Revelation 7:9; Matthew 7:12**

Not quite a year ago, just a few weeks after the horrific October 7 attack by Hamas on Israeli villages, a strange and bizarre incident happened here in Indianapolis. Ruba Almaghtheh was arrested after she rammed her car into a building on North Keystone Avenue because she saw a symbol on a residence resembling a Star of David, the national symbol of Israel. When taken into custody she shouted "Free Palestine! Free Palestine!" She told police she planned the attack after watching the war in the Middle East erupt.

The woman thought she was attacking a Jewish organization when in fact the building belongs to an identified hate group that is anti-semitic and discriminatory toward Jewish people. In other words, because of her extremist views she ended up attacking a group that was devoted to her own cause.

I use this illustration not to make a pro-Israel or anti-Palestinian point. I use it to point out what can be true in any religion, especially Christianity. There are extremists, and extremism can be blinding.

This morning, as we continue our series looking at the Golden Rule as a hope for dealing with the divides in our society, we consider the possibility that Christian Nationalism is a threat to the principles of the Golden Rule. We are hearing more and more about Christian nationalism. A candidate for one of the highest offices in our state identifies as a Christian nationalist, but exactly what does this term mean?

Let's begin by making a distinction between patriotism and nationalism. My friend, Brady Whitton, pastor of Grace UMC in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, points out that patriotism is the devoted love, support and defense of country. Nationalism on the other hand, is about preserving an identity, often determined by religion or race, and this identity is what defines the nation.

The Nazis were nationalists believing that the Aryan race was what should define what it meant to be German. Some Muslim extremist groups, such as the Taliban, weave together their religious and national identities such that anyone who disagrees with them is a threat to both their faith AND nation.

So what do we mean by Christian Nationalism? In an article in *Christianity Today* Paul Miller defines Christian Nationalism as "The belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way." Christian Nationalists often hold to the idea that the founders of America intended for this to be a Christian nation. That depends on which founders you are talking about.

The early pilgrims were Puritans who came to America seeking religious freedom, which is interesting when you consider that on October 3, 1635, the Puritans had Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for promoting religious tolerance and the separation of church and state. In other words the Puritans exiled someone for promoting the very values that brought Puritans here in the first place. Extremism can be blinding.

This is probably the reason that the later founders like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Ben Franklin, and James Madison were not in favor of establishing America as a Christian nation. They knew too well the problems of a Church State in England from which their ancestors left. They knew the pitfalls of extremism in New England. So the first Amendment to the Constitution says that **Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise of religion**. In a treaty initiated by our first president George Washington it declares that “the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” (Jon Meacham, *American Gospel*, p19)

So what are we to make of all this? Is Christian Nationalism good or bad? Or more specifically, is Christian Nationalism a threat to the ethic of Jesus to treat others the way we want to be treated?

Some would say it is not, that what Christian Nationalists want to do is make our country better by establishing Christian values we have lost. They believe that America was a stronger nation when the government didn't prohibit things like prayer in school, especially prayers in Jesus' name. We were a better country, they say, when courthouses could have nativity scenes around them at Christmas time. They would say that their cause is about restoring family values and social norms that keep households strong. They emphasize the security of our nation and protecting life and reducing crime as causes we should care about. Values that promote harmony and wholesomeness are what our country needs.

In his book, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, Stephen Wolfe writes: **“the whole life of man is essentially religious; and politics, the sphere of just relations between men, especially become religious when conducted in a Christian spirit. Nothing can be more fatal to mankind or to religion itself than to call one set of things or persons religious and another secular, when Christ has redeemed the whole.”**

Now, I can't say I disagree with any of this. The idea of “Christ redeeming the whole” is something I have preached. Family values, living in a safe world, is something we should all value. But like most things, the problem is not in the general but the specific. It is when you start talking about what putting these values into practice look like, or what legislation you believe is needed, is when we see problems.

So people opposed to Christian Nationalism say that outlawing mandated prayer in school or Christian displays on public property was not the start of anti-Christian behavior in society. They point out that slavery survived quite well in our US history because it was supported by so called good Christian people.

In fact critics of Christian nationalism make a link between race-related issues and the rise of modern Christian nationalism. In his book *Christians Against Christianity* the author, Obery Hendricks, considers the case of Bob Jones University. Their racist policies of segregation led to their being denied tax exempt status by the IRS. Christian conservatives saw this as a denial of religious freedom rights under the law. So when some Christian Nationalists say that the government is anti-Christian, that their rights are being denied, what they mean specifically is that they are not being allowed to carry out state-funded racism.

This is not about being partisan. Democrat and Republican leaders in both parties have taken strong positions of leading in ways that draw the ire of Christian Nationalists. George H. Bush was very leery of the Moral Majority that was led by Jerry Falwell Sr. And leaders like our own St. Luke's member, the late Richard Lugar, promoted anti-racist legislation that kept many extremists, some in his own party, from supporting him.

Critics of Christian Nationalism also point out how family values become steps to remove the rights of gay, lesbian and transgender people. Safer communities become Anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant efforts. They would also note that some anti-abortion Christians who value the sanctity of life do so even if it means risking the health or lives of mothers.

Now, this gets into individual issues in which we all probably have very strong feelings on both sides. And I want to make clear that just because you do does not make you an extremist. In fact, critics of Christian Nationalism say that the stances on individual issues is not the major concern. The major concern is the way those stances get expressed. Strong feelings and ideology become hate-filled speech. And strongly held positions become using any means to carry out the end. Violence and doing harm become justified.

I don't anyone in our church who condones the violence at the capitol building in Washington three and half years ago, but that was when I started becoming concerned about Christian nationalism, because I didn't just see people carrying political signs or American flags. I saw some in the mob carrying signs with crosses on them and the name of Jesus. Extremism can be blinding.

So does such action threaten the Golden Rule promoted by Jesus to "do unto others as we would have them do unto us?" You have to decide. Keep reading and studying and determining if some of the threats to Jesus ethic today might come not from outside the Church but within it.

Let me close by shifting gears just a little and think about how we might be called to respond in such a divided time among those of the same faith. What might we do?

**1. Stay Focused on our True Identity.** Sociologist Ryan Burge says that politics has become American's "Master Identity." Identifying as Republican or Democrat or

Independent has become superlative. **When that happens to us as Christians we are sunk, because we will either misuse our faith to justify our politics or we will abandon our faith in the same pursuit.** The truth is that now is a time to cling to our highest identity as children of God and citizens of his kingdom.

This is why some churches don't put an American flag in their sanctuary. Its not because they are unpatriotic, it's because they don't want their country to become an idol.

When facing the symbol of imperial power in the form of Pontius Pilate, Jesus refused to bow to him even though it could have saved his life. Instead he spoke of his own authority as the son of a greater king and replied, "my kingdom is not of this world." Nations, empires, rulers, and politicians come and go. It is God's kingdom that lasts.

Now is a time for Christians to claim our true identity. When we get that right we are most able to carry out our civic duties because we allow our faith to inform politics and not the other way around.

**2. Hold Together How We Believe with What We Believe.** Right after speaking the words we call the Golden Rule, Jesus told a parable about two gates, one wide and one narrow. He said the wide gate is easy but typically leads to destruction. Its popular. It's the one everyone crams to go through. That's why its wide. But it might not get you where you really wanted to go.

The narrow gate on the other hand might be hard, but its worthwhile. The better path is usually a harder one, but in the end it pays off. The gate we go through, the path we walk, the way we live matters. It's not just what we believe that counts, it's also the way we live that belief that counts as well. Its how we live that matters.

**Jesus didn't come just to get us into heaven. He came to get heaven into us.** Think about what that looks like. There is a beautiful description of heaven in the verse we heard from the book of Revelation earlier: **"I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."** (Revelation 7:9)

If we struggle with living with people who are very different from us now how are we ever going to take it when we get to heaven? Have you ever thought that heaven and hell could be the same place? The person you can't stand being around right now might be someone you have to be with for all eternity?? Somehow we have to learn to hold together what we believe with how we believe so that we can do that forever and be happy.

And that leads to one final action to take:

**3. Treat Right Rather than Be Right.** This brings us back to the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Make treating people right more important than being right.

One of the books I read on sabbatical was Dallas Willards *The Allure of Gentleness*. He was a conservative theologian but he emphasized grace above all. This book started when his daughter listened to a series of talks her father gave back in 1990. She was so impressed she convinced her dad to work with her in turning them into a book. About the time they started the project he became ill and died. So she took his messages, collections of other papers and writings and published his final book post-humous.

I sat in by a Colorado river one day and read this book and marked it up cover to cover. Let me just share a number of statements from it:

*If we are not gentle in how we present the good news, how will people encounter the gentle and loving Messiah we want to point?...In an age shaped by feuding intellectual commitments and cultural battles over religion, science, truth, and morality, how will we get a hearing by merely insisting that we have the truth on our side? (p4)*

*That's why so many churches have Grace in their name. Not many people want to go to Right Church. I've been to Right Church—you may have been there too—it's a tough place. There are a lot of dead people at Right Church, because life comes by grace. My being right might be of use to somebody, but probably not. I'm not in favor of being wrong, mind you, but being right can be a tremendous burden to carry. (p47)*

*One of the things you lose when you engage in a defensive argument is your capacity to deal with other people as precious, eternal, valuable souls, persons whom God has, as we like to say, a wonderful plan for, for both time and eternity. (p49)*