

7/2/23

**Happy Birthday
Rev. Tim Ensworth**

Mark 12:1-34

Happy birthday! In two days, we will celebrate the 247th birthday of this wide and wild and colorful and storied nation we call our own. 247 years ... A long time? Yes, it is, in some ways. Long enough to be transformed from a tenuous coalition of embittered colonists into an economic and political and cultural world power. Long enough to see the many benefits and enduring virtues of a republic based on guaranteed rights and freedoms and the consent of the governed. And long enough to see those rights and freedoms extended to whole classes of people to whom they were long denied.

And yet, in the larger scope of the history of nations, 247 years is but a brief moment in time. We are still young, very young! Young enough to still be growing, to still be learning, to still be trying to prove the merits of a grand experiment yet to be wholly validated. Young enough to still believe in the ideals avowed at our founding and to want to see them fully realized: the opportunity for all for life, and for liberty, and for the pursuit of happiness.

And young enough to still have time to confess and make amends for our nation's unresolved sins: the sin of abiding and condoning the enslavement of fellow human beings, the shameful legacy which disgraces our democracy still; the sin of degrading and displacing and dehumanizing the inhabitants already living in the land we came to occupy; the sin of unleashing a terrible weapon of mass destruction upon a civilian population.

247 years ... At 247 years old, how are we doing? I expect that most of us are glad to be living here, glad for the extraordinary beauty and diversity of the American landscape, glad too for the extraordinary beauty and diversity of the American people, and glad for the opportunities, for the liberties, for the prosperity our citizenship affords us.

But I expect too that most of us are more than a little troubled over the present condition of our homeland because we are a nation of people divided against ourselves as much or more than at any time in our history. We don't agree on politics. We don't agree on moral imperatives. We don't even agree on the facts.

There is talk, real talk, however fanciful, about civil war. Red states and blue states pursue ever diverging social agendas. The ability of our system to withstand the stresses of extremism from both ends of the political spectrum is being sorely tested. A large number of the governed are simply refusing to consent. Faith in democracy itself is wavering, while a fondness for authoritarianism is growing.

Our nation is about to celebrate a 247th birthday, but will it reach 400 years? Will it reach 300 years? Will it even reach 275 years?

Does it matter? And, in particular, does it matter to us as Christians, as followers of Jesus? And if it does, what do we have to say to each other and to our neighbors from the perspective of the faith that defines who we are?

Not much. Oh, how it pains me to say that! Not much.

Not much, because we, members of the church of Jesus Christ, are as divided as the rest of the nation, and for the same reasons! Look at the church, at the plethora of American churches, and you will see people divided from each other, divided against each other, not by theology, but by politics. We are divided into red and blue churches, just as we are divided into red and blue states. People want to gather, even in church, with people of like political mind and they want to hear words from the pulpit that echo their own dearly held political beliefs.

This should not be! There should not be red and blue churches! We should not come to church to be coddled, but to be challenged!

We are failing! The church is failing to offer a faithful witness to Jesus Christ, failing to offer a healing balm to a world being torn apart, because we are being torn apart, too. We are failing not because we are politically engaged, but because our political engagement is shaped by partisanship, whether conservative or liberal, and not by Jesus.

Not by Jesus. We need to listen to Jesus, all of us, left or right or whatever. We need to listen and learn from Jesus, “the stone which the builders rejected as worthless, [but] turned out to be the most important of all.”

Then Jesus spoke to them in parables: “Once there was a man who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a hole for the wine press, and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to tenants and left home on a trip. When the time came to gather the grapes, he sent a slave to the tenants to receive from them his share of the harvest. The tenants grabbed the slave, beat him, and sent him back without a thing. Then the owner sent another slave; the tenants beat him over the head and treated him shamefully. The owner sent another slave, and they killed him; and they treated many others the same way, beating some and killing others. The only one left to send was the man's own dear son. Last of all, then, he sent his son to the tenants. “I am sure they will respect my son,” he said.

But those tenants said to one another, “This is the owner's son. Come on, let's kill him, and his property will be ours!” So they grabbed the son and killed him and threw his body out of the vineyard.

“What, then, will the owner of the vineyard do?” asked Jesus. “He will come and kill those tenants and turn the vineyard over to others. Surely you have read this scripture?

“The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all. This was done by the Lord; what a wonderful sight it is!”

The Jewish leaders tried to arrest Jesus, because they knew that he had told this parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd, so they left him and went away. (Mark 12:1-12)

The Jewish leaders saw themselves in Jesus' story. They knew this parable was about them. That's what parables are for. Parables are different from fables, intended to teach a single moral lesson. And parables are different from allegories, telling a religious story with coded symbols.

Parables are meant to draw in the hearer. We are meant to see ourselves in the story. The meaning of a parable is not always plain, but we have to puzzle it out, live with it, live in it. Parables demand an active, not passive, response.

The meaning of this parable was quite plain to the Jewish leaders who had accosted Jesus in the Temple. They knew he was talking about them, accusing them of rejecting God's messengers, warning them that God was ready to take away their position and their power. And their response was most active. They wanted to arrest Jesus, but hesitated because of the approving crowd around him, so instead they tried to trap him, trip him up, make him bring himself down.

The Pharisees went first.

Some Pharisees and some members of Herod's party were sent to Jesus to trap him with questions. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you tell the truth, without worrying about what people think. You pay no attention to anyone's status, but teach the truth about God's will for people. Tell us, is it against our Law to pay taxes to the Roman Emperor? Should we pay them or not?"

But Jesus saw through their trick and answered, "Why are you trying to trap me? Bring a silver coin, and let me see it." They brought him one, and he asked, "Whose face and name are these?"

"The Emperor's," they answered.

So Jesus said, "Well, then, pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God." And they were amazed at Jesus. (Mark 12:13-17)

Do you know about the Pharisees? They were the Republicans of their day — social conservatives, suspicious of centralized government, resisting change, wistful for the way things used to be. They tried to get Jesus to out himself, whether as a rebel or collaborator, they didn't care. If he said, "No, don't pay your taxes," he would be identified to the Roman authorities as a seditious troublemaker. But if he said, "Yes," he would crush the hopes of those following him, believing that God had sent him as a liberator.

His answer? "Pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God." And you know what belongs to God!

The Sadducees were next. Do you know about the Sadducees? They were the Democrats of their day — progressives, theological and social liberals, ready to carve out a new way of being Jewish in a new age. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, so they asked Jesus what they thought to be a nonsense question, trying to get Jesus to expose the lunacy of his own beliefs.

Then some Sadducees, who say that people will not rise from death, came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, Moses wrote this law for us: 'If a man dies and leaves a wife but no children, that man's brother must marry the widow so that they can have children who will be considered the dead man's children.' Once there were seven brothers; the oldest got married and died

without having children. Then the second one married the woman, and he also died without having children. The same thing happened to the third brother, and then to the rest: all seven brothers married the woman and died without having children. Last of all, the woman died. Now, when all the dead rise to life on the day of resurrection, whose wife will she be? All seven of them had married her.”

Jesus answered them, “How wrong you are! And do you know why? It is because you don't know the Scriptures or God's power. For when the dead rise to life, they will be like the angels in heaven and will not marry.

Now, as for the dead being raised: haven't you ever read in the Book of Moses the passage about the burning bush? There it is written that God said to Moses, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is the God of the living, not of the dead. You are completely wrong!” (Mark 12:18-27)

Jesus had no patience at all with their flippancy and skepticism. He called them on their ignorance and told them they were flat out wrong.

Pharisees and Sadducees, conservatives and liberals, right and left, Republicans and Democrats — Jesus antagonized them both. He refused to toe any party's line. And the same is true today. Jesus is not a Republican. Jesus is not a Democrat. No political party can rightly claim to be the party of Jesus. Does that mean Jesus has no politics at all?

There was a third group among the Jews of Jesus' day, a group that disengaged from political life and withdrew into the desert where they lived an isolated and separated existence — the Essenes. Some believe John the Baptist may have been an Essene, but Jesus most certainly was not. He went to the desert, to pray, but did not stay there. He lived among the people, with the people, spending precious time with outsiders and outcasts, insurrectionists and collaborators, Samaritans and women, anyone and everyone who needed the hopeful and healing touch of the kingdom of God.

Jesus was engaged with the world as it is, he cared and cares still about the world as it is and the people in it as they are. Jesus has a politics, a guiding set of principles about the way life together should be lived, a politics revealed in his answer to the next question posed to him, this time a question asked in all sincerity: “Which commandment is the most important of all?”

A teacher of the Law was there who heard the discussion. He saw that Jesus had given the Sadducees a good answer, so he came to him with a question: “Which commandment is the most important of all?”

Jesus replied, “The most important one is this: ‘Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. The Lord our God is the only Lord; or The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second most important commandment is this: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment more important than these two.”

The teacher of the Law said to Jesus, "Well done, Teacher! It is true, as you say, that only the Lord is God and that there is no other god but he. And you must love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength; and you must love your neighbor as you love yourself. It is more important to obey these two commandments than to offer on the altar animals and other sacrifices to God."

Jesus noticed how wise his answer was, and so he told him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." After this nobody dared to ask Jesus any more questions. (Mark 12:28-34)

The most important commandments, the guiding principles for how we are to live as followers of Jesus, as Christians, as human beings: love God and love your neighbor.

It's there, at the top of the statement of beliefs of Brewster Baptist Church: "Love is at the heart of God's character, and loving God and other people are foundational to being a follower of Christ."

Love God.

Love God, before everything else, above everything else. Love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength. May the love of God fill your body from the top of your head to the tips of your toes!

When we love God, when we are wholly flooded with love for our gracious and merciful God, the differences between us which seemed so large and irreconcilable become almost nothing at all. We can talk together. We can worship together. We can share communion with each other, as Jesus intended, and we can show a world torn apart how to live at peace.

A primary focus of my own call to ministry has been bridge-building, trying to bring together disparate and divided parts of the church. I was raised as an evangelical Christian and still consider myself such and was ordained in the United Church of Christ, one of the most progressive American churches.

But do we really need those labels at all -- evangelical, progressive, conservative, liberal? Don't they serve only to divide us? Can't we simply identify ourselves, all of us, as Christians, followers of Jesus? It breaks my heart that so-called evangelical Christians and so-called progressive Christians are so focused on pointing out each other's flaws instead of being eager to learn from each other and to appreciate the signs of the real presence of God's guiding and empowering Holy Spirit in each other.

I served a church, First Congregational United Church of Christ in Waterloo, Iowa, for twenty-four years, right down the street from the First Baptist Church of Waterloo where Joe Greemore served as pastor. Celeste Bembry worshipped with us there at First Congregational, gracing our congregation with her exquisite singing and her passionate and expressive and contagious faith.

That church certainly had its flaws and its blindspots, its own prejudices and its own stubbornness, but I was proud of the genuine welcome it offered. I was proud that we drew African-Americans and African-Africans and Burmese people into our midst, that we drew

Roman Catholics and Baptists and Lutherans and Unitarian Universalists into our midst, that we drew gay couples into our midst, that we drew university students and university professors into our midst, that we included among our regular worshippers conservative conservatives and liberal liberals, that we were not gathered together because we thought or acted alike, but because we were alike hungry and thirsty for a taste of God's presence, for a taste of God's grace.

When we love God, all other allegiances, all other loyalties, all other causes become secondary. That includes our loyalty to country, too. We must never put love of country on a par with love of God. No one can serve two masters. When we love God, above everything else, our world grows bigger, full of people and nations that God loves too, and we recognize that we are together citizens first of all, not of this nation or that, but of the kingdom of God.

Love God, and love your neighbor, as you love yourself.

As you love yourself. That is the heart of Jesus' politics: to want for your neighbor, each neighbor, the life you want for yourself — a life free from threat, a life free from want, a life of meaningful work and satisfying play, a life granted dignity and respect, a life granted opportunity to fully enjoy the wonders and beauties of this world, and to have a hand in creating wonder and beauty ... to want that for your neighbor and to do what is in your power to do to make it happen.

Loving neighbor is about unbounded generosity — feeding, clothing, healing, forgiving, defending, reconciling. We are generous because God is generous. We are kind because God is kind. We are merciful because God is merciful, because God wants all to be saved. God wants all to be saved and God sent Jesus to offer himself toward that end.

And that's what we should do: be like Jesus. Be like Jesus, not taking up the name of God as a banner or slogan to fight on our own behalf, but taking up the way of God by offering ourselves on our neighbors' behalf.

So much of American Christianity has become distracted and deluded, drawn needlessly into the culture wars, believing it must fight to justify itself, fight for recognition and public affirmation of its own values, always fighting to overcome the world, instead of offering itself up to save the world. We must not think it is about us, about guarding our own dignity, about saving our own pride.

We will work with each other, we will work side by side;

We will work with each other, we will work side by side;

And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,

yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Jesus granted his followers awesome power: power to heal, to reconcile, to make peace, to save, to have a hand in the birthing of God's kingdom here on earth. But it is the power of servanthood, the power of sacrifice, the power of generosity, the power of love.

Happy birthday.

Yes, happy birthday to this tremendous and troubled land. As citizens may we do all that is in our power to help it realize its promise: providing a safe haven for people regardless of wealth or status or origin; assuring the rights of the many, not the privileges of a few; promoting respect for the rule of law, not the rule of power.

But today, I have in mind another birthday, too, a birthday celebrated five Sundays ago. I am talking about Pentecost, the birthday of the church, when God gave to the gathered believers the gift of the abiding presence of God's own Spirit, to guide them, comfort them, empower them, and to make them one. To make them one ...

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;

And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,

yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

May we honor that birthday by working tirelessly for unity, for community, not merely within this one church, but throughout the wider church of Jesus Christ. And may we honor Jesus by being like him, loving God above all else and offering ourselves — our attention, our aspirations, our strength — to bless our neighbors, all our neighbors.

Questions for Discussion & Reflection:

1. What are some of the loves that compete with love of God? What other masters are we tempted to serve?
2. What are the implications of loving God above all else for the way we view our nation in relation to other nations?
3. What can you do, and what can your church do, to help heal a divided church? What strengths, and what signs of the Spirit's presence, can you identify in churches different from your own (theologically, politically, socially, ethnically)?
4. Who should be welcome in our churches?
5. What neighbors do you think God may be calling you to love - both personally and as a church?
6. What does the way of humility, the way of servanthood, and the way of sacrifice look like in practical terms?