

Justice, Kindness & Humility

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Micah 6:8

Micah 6:6-8
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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At this year's National Prayer Breakfast, just this past Thursday morning, President Donald Trump, when talking about our nation's liberties, declared: “Among those freedoms is the right to worship according to our own beliefs. That is why I will get rid of, and totally destroy, the **Johnson Amendment** and allow our representatives of faith to speak freely and without fear of retribution.” That was in reference to the IRS.

The following morning's *Tulsa World* newspaper had a front page article entitled, “**Pastors divide on politics in the pulpit: Trump pledges to end political limits on churches.**” One pastor in that article said that pastors at times want to address issues from the pulpit that might have some political overtones, and are afraid to do so because they fear losing their IRS tax-exempt status. That's an unfortunate and ill-informed statement, because that's not what the Johnson Amendment is about. We preachers are not prevented from speaking about such things.

The amendment was proposed by then-senator Lyndon B. Johnson in 1954 and added to the IRS Code. It states that any nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) tax exempt status, which includes churches, cannot engage in political activities, specifically conducting political campaign activities to intervene in elections to public office. **What preachers cannot do, then, is make public statements of position in favor of or in opposition to any candidate for public office.** So to say that I, or any other preacher, cannot address political issues that violate an understanding of Christian morality and ethics, or perpetuate injustice or discrimination, simply isn't true. The Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself addressed these issues, which have political implications, all the time and without reserve.

I personally agree with those that believe that changing this law will do more harm than good, leading to even more divisiveness. And by the way, during the heyday of the Moral Majority, many pastors from the Religious Right explicitly violated this amendment by telling their congregations who to vote for. And that's why you will never hear me tell you from this pulpit who you should vote for. However, (you knew that was coming), however, **you will hear me speak in opposition to those values that clearly appear to violate the ways and teachings of Jesus and our Judeo-Christian values.**

A seminary friend of mine, the Rev. Beth Merrill Neel at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Portland, preached a sermon last Sunday in response to the executive order to suspend the entry of refugees into the United States for 120 days; to stop receiving refugees from Syria indefinitely; and to bar from entering the United States for 90 days refugees from seven predominantly Muslim countries: Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen. Curiously, as an aside, none of the predominately Muslim

countries from which actual terrorists have caused casualties in this country are on that list.

Beth, who has always had a wonderful and poetic way with words states beautifully what I would like to convey to you this morning.

I know there are some who would love to hear political sermons every week, and some who never, ever want to hear a political sermon.

Because I believe so deeply in welcoming the stranger, every time I write a sermon that veers into the political, I picture the faces of those I know in the congregation whose politics, I imagine, are different from mine.

Because I think we come to worship for a variety of reasons, and because I know that we need to be encouraged as much as we need to be challenged, I will not preach a political sermon every week. But this week I have felt compelled to because politics has collided head-on into faith.

[Then Beth added her own prophetic voice and perspective] **This executive order shows no justice, no kindness, and no humility. It flies in the face of the [biblical] imperative to welcome the stranger**, to remember that the Israelites were refugees, and Jesus was a refugee [when his family fled to Egypt to escape the political persecution of King Herod].

You may have noticed her reference to the Old Testament passage from Micah 6:8, "God 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?**" This is a biblical imperative in which we are called to live.

Yes, I am all for national security, and I understand the concerns. But because of the understanding of my call as a pastor, and my responsibilities as a Christian, I personally believe that justice trumps security. Yes, that is a political statement, but it is also a statement of faith, of which you may or may not agree. And yes, preachers with a different opinion have the right to express their beliefs from their pulpits. I just wonder, however, how they use the scriptures to validate their position of exclusion.

I guess one of the things that bothers me most is **this administration's version of "extreme vetting" blatantly favors and gives preferential treatment to Christians over Muslims. In my book, that's clearly fits the definition of categorical discrimination, something else that violates my understanding of the ways and teachings of Jesus.** I can't tell you how many articles I've read this past week, including those from the national office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that condemn this executive order. Mixing religion with politics – absolutely! They, too, cite scripture such as Leviticus 19:33-34, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; **you shall love the alien as yourself**, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

We are not called by God or Jesus to ban the 'other.' Earlier in that same chapter of Leviticus is the command, repeated by Jesus, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." **Most of what I'm witnessing these days, however, is fear of neighbor, not love.**

I felt a bit of vindication in my position about all this when I read that Pope Francis issued a blistering statement just yesterday against Christians supporting the what many believe is indeed intended as a Muslim ban. The Pope stated:

The sickness or, you can say the sin, that Jesus condemns most is hypocrisy, which is precisely what is happening when someone claims to be a Christian but does not live according to the teaching of Christ. You cannot be a Christian without living like a Christian.

Referencing the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Pope Francis added: "You cannot be a Christian without practicing the Beatitudes. **You cannot be a Christian without doing what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 25.**" The parable is found in Matthew 25:31-46, and reads in part: "'For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'" Pope Francis concluded:

It's hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of my help. If I say I am Christian, but do these things, I'm a hypocrite."

All nations must focus on "service to the poorest, the sick (and) those who have abandoned their homelands in search of a better future for themselves and their families. In putting ourselves at the service of the neediest we will experience that we already are united; it is God's mercy that unites us."

I stated it a bit less gracefully when I posted a meme on my Facebook page this week that read, "**If the Church isn't the for suffering, then the Church isn't for Christ.**"

So where does this leave us? I encourage you to read the "Something for the Spirit" article in this month's church newsletter. It's entitled, "Let's Fight the Good Fight – with Kindness," written by Tom Rapsas just over a week ago and posted on the patheos.com website. He begins:

Could we be any more divided as a country? It seems like Americans are now standing on two sides of a divide as wide as the Grand Canyon—and it's impossible to get inside the heads of the side that doesn't agree with you. **What are they thinking?**

I'm as outraged as anyone. But on a certain level, I know that's not good. You see, like you, I've got friends and family members on the other side. And the easy thing to do right now is focus on how different we are, to take another's well-intentioned beliefs and demonize them for it.

So how do we handle what are for many of us trying times? Yes, we need to stand up for what we believe in and fight the good fight, but **I suggest that when we're dealing with those closest to us, we do it with a little less outrage, and a little more kindness.**

So I encourage, even implore, each of us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Amen.