

“Will They Know Us By Our Love?”

John 15:12-17; Galatians 5:1, 13-15 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be inspired to share your gospel of humble mercy and love more boldly and effectively. In Jesus' name, Amen.

There are moments for speaking in generalities broad enough to encompass a wide span of perspectives. And there are moments for speaking plainly and calling things what they are because to gloss over vital distinctions perpetuates harm. In many years gone by, we have contented ourselves with broad generalities on occasions like Independence Day weekend, aiming to appeal to a range of perspectives and unite us in common purpose. But much has shifted in recent weeks in these supposedly United States, and the time has come for speaking plainly. So it is that I invite you to join me this morning in wrestling with what it means to live as faithful Christians in the United States of America in 2022.

We can no longer avoid a confrontation with how our faith is being used by those in power to suppress and control others. If we want to be faithful followers of Jesus, we cannot let this continue unaddressed, for the gospel is being maligned and abused. Indeed, to speak plainly, we have seen, in the last two weeks, a Christofascist revolution enacted by the Supreme Court. Democratic norms and long-standing precedents ensuring the appropriate separation of church and state were rejected in favor of imposing the dictates of a narrow and oppressive interpretation of

Christianity upon all Americans, through the decisions about access to abortion, school prayer, and public funding of religious education. To make sure we're all on the same page, let's take a moment to define Christofascism. The term was originated by German theologian Dorothee Sölle to refer to a version of extremist Christianity that aims to impose itself upon everyone else, regardless of the religious make-up of the population. It aims to marry the faith with power, twisting the teachings of a crucified Savior into an authoritarian triumphalism that violently represses all dissent or diversity of thought. Christofascism is, by definition, incompatible with secular democracy, because it does not recognize the value of religious liberty. It wants "freedom" only for itself, the "freedom" to impose its will on everyone else.

Now, we may hear that definition and conclude that this doesn't really have anything to do with us. We are not that kind of Christian. Disciples, foundationally, cherish freedom of belief; we define ourselves by the broad spectrum of theological perspectives we unite around Christ's table. But, my friends, to ignore this moment would be a major failure of faithfulness. We are part of this faith, even if we don't even recognize that extreme expression of it. And we are part of this nation; these decisions affect us as much as anyone else, and our neighbors are looking to us to respond. I need to tell you that much of what I'm going to share with you today I owe to my non-Christian friends, with whom I've been having intense conversations over the past few weeks. I have been touched by the trust they have placed in me, as they shared the ways the current moment is impacting them.

So as we dive into the question of how to be faithful Christians in this moment, let us ground ourselves again in our scripture lessons. Love, Jesus says. Love one another. Love sacrificially, and bear fruit. You are free, Paul says. “Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.” Do not “bite and devour,” but “love your neighbor as yourself.” These three principles can guide us, as we discern how to stand against the Christofascism threatening our republic: Love, bearing fruit, and rejecting the impulse to abuse our freedom to hurt others. Let us hold onto these teachings as we think through three aspects of our response.

First of all, we need to grapple with our identity as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As a denomination, we have historically placed Christian unity at the top of a pile of theological values. We have declared that we are not the judges of whether someone else is a follower of Jesus or not. We have endeavored to find partners for ministry across lines of tradition and doctrine, naming the finer details of belief “non-essentials” that should not get in the way of serving God’s people. So it is an awkward thing for us to openly denounce the way other people are living out their Christianity. “No creed but Christ,” we have said, so if those folks are calling themselves Christian, who are we to argue?

But to say “No creed but Christ” doesn’t mean no creed; it means that Christ is our creed. And Jesus himself is telling us in this passage from John today and in so many other places, that his followers will be recognizable by their fruit. Are the results of Christofascism the fruits of love? Are they bearing mercy and compassion

into the world? Are they sharing grace and peace with God's people? Do they tell the world about Jesus? No. Rather, a 10-year-old rape victim in Ohio was forced to continue a pregnancy this past week. People suffering with rheumatoid arthritis have had their medications taken away because those same drugs can terminate pregnancies. Examining the fruits of these decisions makes clear that they are not of Jesus. They are not loving or gracious. They do not offer care to God's precious children or bring healing or relief from suffering to God's people. We cannot let our dreams of Christian unity muffle our denunciation of the cruelty of these policies. They are hurting people. We must stand up and speak plainly: this is not the way of Jesus!

And yet, there is a second part of this that we must heed. Again, I must give thanks to my non-Christian friends for daring to their unvarnished perspectives with me. If you want to respond faithfully to this current moment, I encourage you to get yourself some non-Christian friends who will tell you the truth, because without them, we will not be able to see our situation clearly. Much as we want to declare that Christofascism is something else, not real Christianity, that those people are not followers of Jesus, my friends are telling me that that act of distancing seems like a cop-out. Important as it is to denounce this twisting of the gospel within Christian circles, we cannot escape some responsibility for repairing the damage. From the outside, the distinctions are hard to see. The authoritarian tendencies within Christianity have held sway and made more noise than the rest of us for many decades

now. What we see as anathema is what many Americans simply think Christianity is. They don't know we're here; they don't know we're different. Our difference isn't having any impact on their lives, so why should they concern themselves with the distinction? When they see us trying to explain that these totalitarian edicts aren't true Christianity, it looks like we're passing the buck and trying to wriggle out of owning up to where we've gone wrong.

The truth is that we've tolerated these heresies within the Christian family for far too long. In the name of a false unity that glossed over all sorts of damage, we've allowed these people to claim the name of Jesus while espousing principles that directly contradict the gospel. Our non-Christian friends and neighbors need to see us telling these folks where to stick their idolatries. They need to know we are passionately promoting remedial theology, teaching the ways of love and mercy that faithfully reflect God's intention for our world. There are plenty of people currently trapped in Christofascist churches who are only still there because we've allowed the line between these extremist ideologies and what Jesus commands to be blurred to the point of invisibility. We can invite them to escape. We can welcome them into a better way. And in doing so, we can show the rest of the country what Christianity really is. We may not know exactly how to do this, and we may not be very good at it. But as we get started, we cannot afford to pass the buck because our neighbors are watching and they need to see us witness to the power of Christ's love to transform that which is broken and damaging.

Finally, a third point aspect of our response comes from another perspective to speak to that same impulse we have to distance ourselves from Christofascism. I have seen so many comments over the past few weeks lamenting how the “American Taliban” or the “Christian Taliban” have taken over our country. Let me be clear: the Taliban in Afghanistan is a terrible, repressive, extremist regime. But they have nothing to do with what is happening in these United States. And here is what happens when we use terminology like this. First of all, using references to Islam to describe the terrible things happening here promotes Islamophobia. No, our Muslim friends and neighbors are not supporters of the Taliban; they denounce them every chance they get. But those who are prone to discriminating against Muslims do not care about the difference between ordinary Muslims and the Taliban, any more than non-Christian Americans understand the difference between the Disciples of Christ and Christofascists. They will conflate decent, freedom-loving Muslims with the Taliban just to rationalize their own hatred and violent behavior. When we use terms like this to express the extremity of our current situation, we contribute to the problems and dangers threatening our neighbors.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, to use references to Islam to describe the actions of our Supreme Court, comprised primarily of Christians, implies that there aren't examples extreme enough within the Christian tradition to adequately cover it. It is another distancing technique, and it's a lie. Our tradition includes the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, impassioned rationalizations for

slavery – we have no need to look beyond the borders of Christianity for examples extreme enough to describe this situation. We cannot address the depth and damage of what is happening to our faith in these days until we own it as ours to address. To compare the Supreme Court to the Taliban is a distraction, a way of avoiding a direct look at the Christian roots of this terror. We must be braver than that. We must be humbler than that. We must be more loving to our Muslim neighbors and friends, who have been through quite enough already. Just as we expect them to denounce the Taliban and other Islamist extremists continually to prove their loyalty to democratic values, we must recognize our obligation to speak out over and over against this extremist wing of Christianity, as long as it takes.

So where does this all leave us, as Christians trying to faithfully follow Jesus in the United States of America in 2022? It's a rough, uphill climb. At the moment, the rest of the country doesn't know we are Christians by our love, but by the hateful, repressive policies we're imposing. We need to find a new relationship with our desire for Christian unity, one that doesn't gloss over dangerous, anti-Christian ideologies. We need to find a way to denounce Christofascism without claiming we have no relation to it, so that we can dismantle it, in respectful cooperation with our neighbors and friends of other faiths and none. We need to listen to those who can see what all this looks like from the outside, and heed their call to avoid distancing ourselves from the problem, with "No true Scotsman" fallacies or references to Islam used as distractions. It's a tall order.

So let's remind ourselves once again of those teachings of Jesus that are supposed to be grounding us. In order, I believe what we had was Love, Love, and Love. Love your neighbors; love your friends. Love sacrificially. Bear the fruit of love in all that you do. Use your freedom to love, rather than indulging yourself in biting and devouring others. This is the command we are called to live by. This love is the good news we are called to share. We must be louder. We must be more obvious. We must speak plainly, for broad generalities are part of what allowed us get to where we are today. We must not be afraid to speak out when people are using Jesus' name to promote ideologies of hatred and repression. We must re-double our efforts to offer loving invitations to those who are waking up to realize that the churches they've devoted themselves to are worshipping something other than Jesus. Let us give thanks that we still have the freedom to stand up and speak out to stop the spread of Christofascism in this country. Let us ask God's help in discerning all the ways we can do that. Let us turn to Jesus, again and again, so that love truly does guide everything we do. Let us call upon the power of the Holy Spirit to make us wise and fearless in the face of falsehoods and danger. It's time to love our neighbors. Hallelujah and Amen.