

Sermon Psalm 146

‘Do not put your trust in mortals’

November 10th, 2024

At the beginning of October, I traveled to Berlin, mainly to see my son, Jonathan, who moved there recently. Soon after I booked the flight, I realized that I’d be there for the German national holiday, the Day of Reunification, which is celebrated on October 3rd. And I thought: how cool to be in the German capitol on the National holiday! How cool to be in the place where the reunification started, with the opening and the fall of the Berlin Wall! And, by the way, the wall came down almost exactly 35 years ago, on November 9th 1989. Now you may ask why the Germans didn’t make November 9th their national holiday – but if you know German history, you know that November 9th, 1938, the infamous ‘Night of Broken Glass’ happened, which started the systematic persecution and extermination of the Jewish population in Germany. German politicians were smart enough choose another day as the National holiday.

But back to October 3rd, 2024. One of the special events on that day was an ecumenical worship service at Berlin Cathedral. I went with a friend. Now this worship service was just amazing, with not one, but two excellent choirs and wonderful soloists. The music was fantastic.

There was no sermon that day, but what was called a chancel talk, given by a member of the German Bundestag, or parliament. This gentleman represents the Christian Democratic Party in Germany – the party of former chancellor Angela Merkel; a party which is considered center-right, so rather conservative - at least by German standards.

I didn’t have high hopes for this chancel talk – having lived in the United States for such a long time, I expected some partisan political speech from the pulpit, thinly veiled in pseudo-Christianity. Boy, was I in for a surprise! This member of parliament gave a genuine, thoughtful and very differentiated talk; he didn’t minimize the challenges Germany is facing right now, like a lack of trained and qualified workers, immigration, and the strengthening of parties on the far right – but at the same time, he emphasized that, as a nation founded on biblical principles – and especially the principles based on the words and deeds of Jesus Christ -, these principles must be upheld. Like care for the neighbor, and especially the

weak and vulnerable one. As for the government, caring for the weak and vulnerable means: funding of programs for the aging and disadvantaged, and the continued dedication to a single-payer healthcare system; and fair policies and processes for all seeking refuge and asylum in Germany. Overall, he stressed the importance of people looking out for each other, the importance of community, where everyone pitches in according to their abilities – and yes, this includes financial abilities. And those who have more have to pitch in more. Again, just as a reminder, this was a member of the rather conservative center-right party. But of course his party also has ‘Christian’ in its name.

And I was thinking how refreshing it was to hear him speak like this. Preach it, brother!

But I could also tell that he was somewhat nervous, because there are many in Germany right now who don’t want to hear such words. In Germany, just like in this country, clergy are often accused of being too ‘political’ when they quote - and preach on - the actual words of Jesus Christ.

And since I heard this thoughtful and faithful reflection in Berlin, I have wondered: how would this chancel talk have been received here in the U.S. in the current political and sociological climate?

It also made me wonder how Jesus would be received if he came back today and preached the same things he preached 2,000 years ago; things like: love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemies, turn the other cheek, treat others as you want to be treated, forgive seven times seventy times, if you want to be great, you have to humble yourself and serve others, take up your cross and follow me...

As those following the teachings of Jesus Christ, we often find ourselves at odds with a world which is heavily influenced by other forces and ideologies. We have to be realistic, right? Many of the prophecies of the Old Testament and the words of Jesus just sound too utopian, just too good to be true. We know that the lion does not just lie peacefully next to the lamb. We know that those who are stronger, richer, more powerful don’t just forgo their advantage and leave the weaker one be, or even better, help them thrive. We know that there are always those who take advantage of the mercy and generosity of others or a system. After all, paradise is lost. And the kingdom of heaven may be already growing among us like a mustard seed, but it hasn’t entirely become a reality yet. As human beings, we are flawed, no matter, how hard we try to be good. And, yes, I am using this word now that

seems archaic in our day and age: we are sinful. And we acknowledge it every Sunday, as we confess our sin.

But what does sinful mean? It seems that many think of moralistic failings when they hear the word ‘sin’, and often some sexual stuff is in the mix as well. Some may think of the 7 deadly sins in the Roman Catholic tradition: pride, greed, envy, wrath, lust, and sloth. But the roots of sin are much deeper than that. Martin Luther had a great definition of sin. He said it’s being curved into ourselves – staring at our own navel, seeking our own advantage first – and that not necessarily in big evil ways. I think he hits the nail on the head with that definition. And because we are so curved into ourselves, we tend to participate in systems that are unjust – as long as we get what we want out of it, why would we care about those who are less well-off or more disadvantaged than we are? Why should we straighten up, take a good look around, and care about what is going on around us?

And when I say we, I mean the entire human race. Nobody is perfect. ‘And if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,’ as we read in 1st John. We are all sinners. That’s a fact.

However, throughout history, human beings have had the tendency to idolize certain people, put them on a pedestal, and maybe even follow them blindly, as if they were infallible or some sort of demi-god. And that could be rather innocent – think of the idolization of sports stars, pop stars, movie stars, or – these days – online influencers. But it becomes dangerous when we are talking about people in power, and especially political power – flawed people, sinful people, who, first and foremost, are staring at their own navels like anyone else. It becomes dangerous when we put all our hope in them to redeem us from the issues we are facing as communities and societies. History has shown over and over that such blind trust leads to disaster – and I as a German of course am very sensitive in that matter...

People in Israel already knew the danger of idolizing human beings thousands of years ago. We heard in today’s psalm, ‘Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.’

Now I acknowledge that this is a little tricky. We have to have a certain level of trust when we entrust our communities and our lives to elected officials. But I think what these ominous words from the psalm are telling us is that we have to be careful with our trust, and remain critical of our leaders, who, after all, are flawed human beings like anyone else. Not follow them blindly and look the other way

when they do something that is wrong or harmful, but rather, hold them accountable.

AND – and here the psalm is very clear – we mustn't forget our first and foremost authority in life, which is God. 'Our hope is in the God of Jacob, who made heaven and earth, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry, who sets the prisoners free, who opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the strangers, upholds widows and orphans' – in short, our hope is in the God who is on the side of the underdog and the marginalized, the powerless. Our hope needs to be in God, who uses power for the good of all, and who uses it to give life to the fullest for all.

Our hope needs to be in God, who became human; who came into this world, not as a mighty king or ruler, brutally imposing his reign on everyone – I mean, he could have been such a leader, if he had given into the temptations of Satan in the wilderness – but who came as a lowly servant to all. As a God who isn't staring at his own navel, but who is constantly reaching out and touching our lives. God is our ruler. God is the one we follow. God is the one we are called to emulate – I mean, we have this wonderful phrase, WWJD – what would Jesus do? We are called to trust and follow him and do as he did – well, in our imperfect and flawed ways.

And I think it is especially important to remember all this post-election.

In these times that are so contentious and anxious and so fraught with putting blind trust and hope in worldly leaders, we mustn't forget that our first and foremost allegiance is not to political leaders, to parties, and not even to countries, but rather to the triune God – the Father, who created the entire world and holds it in his loving and gentle hands, who reforms, and re-creates; the Son, who became one of us in humble service, and who alone has the power to redeem; and the Holy Spirit, who puts a fire under our bums and patiently tries to blow us into new directions. To this God be honor and glory and adoration and our trust – during these times, and forever. Amen

