

SERMON- Proper 25 (B)
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Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Psalms 127

Hebrews 9:24-28

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
November 10, 2024

Mark 12:38-44

OPENING:

Grammar Lesson #1- Subjunctive Mood and Prayer

I have told this story before, how eight years ago,

I was a seminarian new to my Field Ed Parish,

and as luck would have it that November 2016,

I was assigned to preach the Sunday after the Presidential election.

Classmates of mine, after the surprising election results midweek, had their supervisors step in to preach, or at least had their sermons vetted by more experienced clergy.

I was not so lucky, so instead soldiered on and preached a very forgettable sermon that Sunday eight years ago.

Here I am again, standing before the people of God—in “long robes with the best seat and the place of honor”—called upon to make sense of our lives in divided and difficult times.

POLITICS:

Jesus, in our Gospel reading, told the people to “Beware” of such individuals, taking aim at the religious authorities who were taking everything from the poor. Confusingly, Jesus then commends the poor widow for giving everything to the religious authorities.¹

As always, Jesus is the most interesting (and maybe vexing) of conversation partners, breaking all the rules of polite conversation by talking about religion and politics and money—blissfully there is no mention of sex in our passage, but he was not scared of that either.

Last week, perhaps anticipating all this, in order to steel myself for the Election this time around, I visited our “Old Church” on Elden and Grace streets downtown, St. Timothy’s home from 1881-1969.

I thought about all that that building had witnessed.

How St. Tim’s struggled through politics and election in those years. How it was born in the difficult time after the Civil War when Virginia was not even a state

¹ Mark Douglas “Theological Perspective” (Mark 12.38-40) in Elizabeth Johnson and Cynthia Jarvis, eds. 2014. *Feasting on the Gospel-Mark*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 386.

again and its citizens could not vote in elections. It somehow was comforting to think about all that the building, and our forebearers, had been through, all the way up the turbulence of the 1960s.

That building is now owned and lovingly maintained by the local Masonic Order and my guide last week told me that there was one rule of Masonic lodge meetings, that they are not allowed to mention religion or politics.

We the Church are, declaratively, are not under that prohibition, hopefully we do indeed talk about religion and hopefully we talk about politics when appropriate, and money when appropriate.

ELECTION:

William Willimon, the Methodist bishop and preacher, preached the Sunday after the 2016 Election as well, and in that sermon he *unforgettably* said this:

“We just had an election (you may have noticed)...

but the most important election we have ever had...

was a long time ago on a Friday afternoon.

We had a vote and, remember,...

we were the ones who voted for Barabbas.

and then the same God... who we crucified...

turned around and voted for us!”²

How does that story hit you, people of St. Timothy’s?

There are many, judging from the tears on Wednesday at our Healing Eucharist, who might not like it, it’s a little too soon for that sort of provocation.

There are others who, in turn, are bewildered by the hurt and the pain felt by that first group. They might question such a dramatic comparison for a secular election.

And perhaps a precious few, me not among them, are right there with Willimon.

I envy your faith and your spiritual maturity, the belief that regardless of what happens in our political elections, that it’s “business as usual in the Kingdom of God.”

GOSPEL:

Getting back to our Gospel reading, in the first part we hear Jesus taking the scribes, the religious authorities, down a few notches.

As a religious authority, I am not sure if I like that very much.

² Bishop William H. Willimon. Sermon. “Fear of the Other” November 13, 2016 (Aldersgate United Methodist Church, - Alexandria, VA) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ms3DYVeaoNQ>

Interestingly, though, the scribes back then were ALSO the political authorities. They controlled the levers of governments and the taxation and the distribution of funds. “Beware” Jesus says.

I like that a little better.

The scribes were learned folk who did what priests are supposed to do, they had as their lofty responsibility, the goal of... mediating truth to the people... explaining truth to the people.

It might sound like Sour grapes, but I am not sure we priests have that role anymore.

As the sequence goes, in the Middle Ages, people woke up and the first thing that they would do is: PRAY

That’s the way they were joined to God and their fellow man.

Priests helped in that effort

In Modern times, people woke up and the first thing that we do is: READ the newspaper.

That’s the way they were joined to their fellow man, and to their New God, this thing called the nation. The media helped.

In post-modern times, people wake up and the first thing they do is: CHECK their phones, that’s the way that WE THINK we are being joined to our fellow man, but we actually connected to our Newest God, the illusion of connectivity in a world that is so lonely.

But this is not an anti-social media screed. It’s actually an anti-political screed.

Notice the evolution from priest, to media persons to politician.

I am concerned about the authority around Truth that is being passed down the line.

As an example of this, an Episcopal priest wrote about going to a political rally recently for the candidate for this election that turned out to be the winner.

He wrote about it after: “When he appeared on the catwalk that led to the podium — Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the USA” playing — I could see as everyone leapt to their feet and raised their cameras in hopes to catch a picture of the former president, and I took a photo of my own. it occurred to me that maybe it wasn’t that press were the priests of the secular age, but the politicians who have become our pastors. The feeling in that moment and the visuals of arms raised, music pulsing, the fervent intensity, all looking toward an elevated stage — it was

uncomfortably reminiscent of churches where I have worshiped and where many in this country still do.”³

Just to assure you that this goes both ways, and that neither side is immune to this desire for a political messianism...

Here is a sampling of covers of the magazine *Newsweek* from a decade back:

“Obama: God of All Things” “The Second Coming” and “Obama: Messiah?”

At our own seminary, Virginia Theological, when it built its new chapel in 2016... inscribed one of the Transepts are words spoken by... Barack Obama, someone who is not Episcopalian, or have anything to do with the Seminary. He was simply a person who was popular during that moment in the process of mediating truth, who we grant authority to.

Grammar Lesson #2- Commas in the Manuscript

CONCLUSION

Why has it gotten that way?

Probably because we the church have not been doing our job.

We have demonstrated too many examples in the modern-day of an institution that devours widows' houses and says long prayers the sake of appearances.

We get bogged down in the quadrennial elections and don't quite have the courage to talk about the one that happened 2000 years ago.

“Beware” Jesus says about that type of religious leader, or that type of political leader.

I wish that Jesus had nicer things to say about political leaders on this Sunday.

I wish that he had more helpful advice about stewardship, frankly.

But Jesus refuses to follow our advice on how to be the Son of God.

He keeps challenging us to live out his example, his model, his claim to Truth and Authority.

As Americans, we love to celebrate our independence, but as Christians, we need to be celebrating our dependence on God.

Which is actually a great freedom, the knowledge that we have been chosen, we have been named winners, despite it all.

³ Matthew S.C. Olver. “Political Religion or Religious Politics?” *The Living Church* (November 4, 2024).
<https://livingchurch.org/commentary/political-religion-or-religious-politics/>

AMEN