

“Light in the Darkness,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 1/25/26

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matthew 4:12-23

*[T]he people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.*

In the Gospel of Matthew, the evangelist is quoting from our other reading from the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah was speaking in a time of difficulties for the people of Israel, and the gospel is repeating that hopeful promise of light coming to those who are in darkness, darkness like that suffered by the people of Judea in the time of the Roman Empire.

What did Jesus say? *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."*

This is mentioned as a core teaching of Jesus, what he would go on to proclaim to those who might listen. This particular passage then leads into Jesus finding Peter and Andrew, James and John as they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee. He calls for them to join him.

So, these men were out working. Some stranger wanders up to them and says come join me so you might become fishers of men. Come join me so that you too can proclaim the message of repentance. Jesus had been a disciple of John the Baptist, so he might have been a familiar face or name to them, but still this was not an everyday conversation. In our time and with our modern mindset, we might wonder how quickly they decided to put down their nets. That might seem hasty to one of us.

Maybe we would have asked a few questions. Perhaps we would have checked back home with people about this enormous change. We do not hear about any of that, only that these men joined right away. They followed Jesus without any second thought.

And this got me wondering. Wondering about people. Wondering about such decisions and about human beings in general. How we make up our minds, how do we choose a path forward. What in our underlying nature would tell us about such moments in time. This is a question of anthropology, the study of human beings. And what can we imagine doing now using stories from long ago, which is really at the heart of this practice we call religion.

Religion as a word has two likely roots. The Latin verb *religare* means to bind something, to hold it fast. There is also a similar sounding Latin verb *relegere* which means to read over or to consider carefully. The word *religion* could derive from one or the other, or maybe both. Words take on meaning from many directions.

And religion can mean both to bind something and to consider something carefully. The disciples were being bound in this moment by choice and yet I do not see them as considering things carefully. Not as they dropped their nets and went along with Jesus in a moment.

Would you do that? Would you one day leave work, leave your family, leave home altogether? Would you travel around listening to someone teach and preach? Would you do so without an itinerary or for that matter a sack of gold to make the planning and the journey any easier? Would you rely upon faith and the grace of God to make it through?

Now, mind you, during Jesus' ministry there is little indication that the disciples were doing anything. We hear about what Jesus was doing: *Jesus went throughout all Galilee, teaching in*

*their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.*

And we know that after Jesus died, the disciples went around teaching and preaching and healing. But for some period, they seem to have been merely followers. They seem to have been students at the foot of their master. We know that some people had responsibilities within the group, like Judas Iscariot being in charge of their money, which did not turn out well by the way.

But otherwise, these men and women (and *yes* I firmly believe there were women like Mary Magdalene following Jesus) were between who they were and who they would come to be. And that fascinates me. We do not always give people around us the grace to figure out who they are going to be.

What do you want to be when you grow up? What are you studying to be in school? Now that you have graduated, what are your plans? Hurry up and make a choice that we can declare acceptable – is that the way it should be or is that the way it has to be?

One important question in religion is our understanding of human nature. What is it? What is the fundamental, naturally occurring character of human beings? Is it good and altruistic? Is it sinful and depraved? Or is it more variable, less predictable from person to person? Perhaps depending on circumstances, culture, or environment? More about possibilities than certainties?

Religious traditions often present clear ideas about human nature. Some of you may have grown up in the Reformed tradition from which our Unitarian forbears arose. Religious leaders like John Calvin declared human nature to be totally depraved. That depravity arises from the Fall, from the Garden of Eden, and the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. In this sense, every human being is born enslaved to the service of sin, without choice and without redemption except through the grace of God.

Other religious traditions do not take such an absolute position. In the Catholic tradition, Thomas Aquinas wrote that human beings were made in the image of God, citing scripture of course, and that even if that image has been wounded by the Fall, it remains. The same could be said for Orthodox Christianity. The church father Gregory of Nyssa spoke of a blurring of the image of God, but further maintained that human beings retain free will and a capacity for reason. So, we might ask ourselves, are we depraved or wounded or distorted in some manner of speaking?

But those are not the only options. Other traditions, religious or philosophical, have a more positive understanding of human nature. Many East Asian traditions like Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism assume that human beings are more prone to the good than the bad. There is a process at work, whether that is moral cultivation for the Confucians or the system of karma and reincarnation for Buddhists and Hindus.

Islam also assumes a generally good sense of human nature, though the capacity for committing sin exists. Put another way, human beings can fall from grace by their own actions. One of the reasons you offer charity, known as *zakat*, and pray daily and fast when required is to maintain a closeness to God. And so, even though the term human nature suggests a sense of one's character from the beginning, it might be a propensity rather than something set in stone.

In our own tradition, a classic Unitarian would firmly believe that moral cultivation was the pathway to God. This was a theological reaction to, or rejection of, the view of Calvinism from

which Unitarianism grew. Unitarians could not accept the idea that human beings were fundamentally depraved or the proposition that we have absolutely no control over whether we might be saved or damned for all eternity.

Unitarians also drew from philosophical traditions that assumed a more positive outlook on human nature. For example, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, the influential Enlightenment era philosopher, once wrote that, “[T]here is no original perversity in the human heart,” meaning there was no such thing as original sin. Unlike many Enlightenment figures, Rousseau had positive view of religion, imagining God as an ever present good in comparison to a rather negative view of society.

It is not human nature that causes us to stray from God but the influences of human society. Rousseau was from Geneva, the heartland of Calvinism, and his views on society and religion seem to arise from his issues with that theocratic society. He wrote in his famous work, *The Social Contract*, that followers of Jesus would not make good citizens, which was a point of pride rather than criticism.

And that got me wondering...*should* followers of Jesus be good citizens? Not that we should all become bandits and pillage the countryside or become pirates and sail the Seven Seas. But if human nature is basically good and yet there is so much bad in society, does that mean that society is the problem rather than the inherent sinfulness of human beings? And if the influences of society make us worse off, is it better to be a good follower of Jesus on the margins rather than a good citizen in the middle? Are these competing identities or can they be reconciled?

This week, I saw many religious colleagues travel to Minneapolis. They went there in response to the violence over the past few weeks and in response to the activities of ICE, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. Obviously, there are differing opinions about immigration into our country. About how tightly the borders should be controlled and what should be the best ways of assessing who gets in. Back and forth, round and round, no clear answers forthcoming.

The people protesting have been called domestic terrorists. Some have placed themselves between ICE officers and those suspected of being in the US without authorization. Journalists covering the events have been charged with various offenses.

Which leads to a question: are these people bad citizens? Or perhaps, are they good followers of Jesus?

One group disrupted a church service because one of the pastors is an ICE supervisor. Disrupting church services is not a minor issue, as someone who conducts church services. But in response to this event, the U.S. Attorney General suggested that Jesus would never have done something like that. She said, "Jesus Christ would never have stormed a church in protest of the people who were running it."

Again, disrupting church services is not anything I would recommend. But for context, I wanted to quote from scripture, specifically Matthew 21:12-13, the same gospel we read from this morning: *Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a den of robbers."*

So, was *Jesus* a bad citizen? Was Jesus a domestic terrorist, at least under the current lines of thinking? In case you were wondering, Jesus was likely executed because of this event, along with the allegation that he had proclaimed himself a king. We know this because it is written out in the Bible. We know this because crucifixion was the Roman punishment for being a bandit or a rebel, those who disrupted the smooth flow of Roman society.

Now it is not simple or easy to compare our behavior with that of Jesus. However, I do not think it would be too much of a leap of logic to observe that Jesus' behavior is *not* traditionally thought of as sinful (generally the opposite). And yet here he was, tipping over the tables in the Temple and driving out the money changers. The money changers who were charging people for exchanging Roman coins into Temple coins so that they could then be used to buy sacrificial animals to be offered in the Temple for the forgiveness of sins and ritual purification. In other words, Jesus was disrupting religious services.

The allegation in Minnesota was that a Southern Baptist minister was a local official for ICE enforcement. The protest was seeking to have the minister resign his pulpit because the two roles of minister and law enforcement are fundamentally at odds.

If we assume that human beings are fundamentally fallen creatures enslaved to sin, there might not be anything discordant about someone preaching the gospel and then rounding up immigrants and placing them in detention camps. If we assume that human beings are fundamentally good creatures but that sinful influences might lead them away from God, then we might need to step back and consider the nature of what is being done.

And if we assume that good followers of Jesus do not make good citizens then the expectations of society might at times stand at odds with the expectations of Jesus Christ and the expectations of God. I am not trying to suggest that, for example, a police officer might be inherently incapable as serving as a minister. One of my classmates from Boston University was a county sheriff down in Virginia and he is as fine a man as you would ever want to meet. My family has a long tradition of serving in the Boston police department and I would hope they were and are all good souls following the example of Jesus.

But like all of us stumbling our way through life, we have to make choices. Choices about right and wrong. Choices about what we ought to do and what we ought not to do as our prayer book describes it. There is nothing inherently wrong with trying to maintain good order in society or even an orderly form of immigration. You might be surprised to hear me say that, but I do believe there should be a good and orderly process for people to enter our country and to become citizens. We can get into the details of that and the right ways of organizing it some other Sunday.

However, there is nothing good or orderly about grabbing people off the streets without giving them a chance to show that they are in our country lawfully. There is nothing good or orderly about invading people's homes without due process or just cause. There is nothing good or orderly about hiring thousands of ICE officers to expedite deportations while doing nothing to improve or to rationalize the process by which people can become citizens. And there is nothing good or orderly about attacking people who are lawfully protesting or about shooting people simply trying to make their way home.

If one of our local police officers did anything like that, there would be outrage and likely criminal charges. No one should be immune from the consequences of their violent actions. That does not excuse violence by protesters, but there seems to have been a lot of violence in the other direction, violence well beyond self defense or related to maintaining law and order.

This January, Bishop Rob Hirschfeld of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire urged clergy to "get their affairs in order" and to prepare their wills, citing a "new era of martyrdom" following intense immigration enforcement and a fatal shooting by an ICE agent in Minneapolis. He specifically called for clergy to protect the vulnerable and to place themselves in harm's way. And he implicitly called upon them to risk their lives to do so.

From the Catholic Church, Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago wrote recently: "We oppose the indiscriminate mass deportation of people." This is the first time the U.S. Catholic Church has directly criticized the current administration's immigration policy. These are unusual and dire statements made by the leaders of two of the largest mainline Christian denominations in the United States. Similar statements have been made by other denominations, including the Unitarian Universalist Association.

What does it mean when your faith and your civic identity collide?

Returning to our prior questions, are human beings essentially sinful? Are they inherently good? Or are they something else, with the potential for both good and evil depending upon the society in which they live? I lean toward the latter, with human beings learning to be one versus the other. And, as someone who teaches about Jesus, who quotes him all the time, and who on a good day tries to follow in his example, I cannot help but remember Jesus in the Temple, flipping over the tables, driving out the money changers, and then being put to death for causing trouble in the Roman Empire.

It seems clear that Jesus was not always a *good citizen*, meaning a law-abiding citizen, one following the laws of Rome and the dictates of the Temple authorities in Jerusalem. And throughout the centuries, people opposing injustice have been cited for violating the law while also being embraced as followers of Jesus.

A follower of Jesus should not stay silent when the teachings of their faith are being trampled on. A follower of Jesus may therefore have no choice but to place the requirements of their faith over the requirements of their society.

As I say practically every Sunday, Jesus taught us two simple and timeless lessons to be followed before anything else: to love God and to love one another. The question before us now is at what point does our desire to follow Jesus and his commandments require us to reconsider what it means to be a good citizen.

Amen

