

“WHAT OUR NATION NEEDS NOW,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, January 10, 2021

Congregation, today is the first Sunday after Epiphany, a fresh Christmas season that extends over the next six weeks taking us to the season of Lent. Carrying over from Christmas, the symbol of Epiphany is the Bethlehem star that drew the wise men to Jesus’ manger side. In Christian symbology, the star represents the revelation of Jesus to the gentiles, the three wise men first among them. Epiphany itself is intended to be a season in which we seek to carry the glow of Christ into the life of the larger world.

Our world right now can use some of Christ’s glow and all the star shine possible. And the wisdom of the Wise Men too. I don’t think I am overstating or exaggerating when I observe that we are living through some dark times, perhaps the very toughest of times. It is not just the Covid-19 pandemic, which is bad enough. But there is so much frustration and discontent at large. Throughout this past year we’ve certainly seen it in the protests which have bedeviled American streets over the past year in response to outrage over policing-related deaths. Then, more recently, there was the phalanx of armed anti-quarantine demonstrators under the rotunda of our own Michigan State Capitol, which has since proved to be a dress rehearsal for the invasion and sacking of the U.S. Capitol Building taking place last Wednesday.

But there have been many more “littler” incidents all adding up. Have you noticed on the road all the crazy, erratic driving—a danger to the rest of us in any proximity? And just listen to people talk! Distrust is rampant, especially when it comes to the institutions that used to be the bedrock for our life together. Men and women have temper tantrums over school schedules and sports cancellations or postponements. We see scorn towards election results—widespread contentions that it’s all rigged. In many instances, folks have ceased believing what public health officials say. Neighbors report themselves as vaccine skeptics. “I’m not going to take that stuff, are you?” Conspiracy theories, often outlandish, run rampant. Suspicion rules. More people than before seem to be looking out for “Number 1”—in other words, themselves--and maybe their own family only. What have we come to?

The 19th century British poet Gilbert Keith Chesterton, who also wrote the words to some of our great Christian hymns, once declared that America is “a nation with the soul of a church.” He meant that as a great compliment. Remember when we used to tout, if not brag, about America being a “Christian country,” particularly in contrast to so many nations elsewhere where Christianity has fallen so totally by the wayside? Yet, honestly, the way folks are behaving in this great land of ours today suggests to me that we don’t have Christ so much in heart or mind anymore. That’s not merely the case for those who have already exited from Christian life as self-declared atheists or agnostics. Or for those who have now taken to describing themselves as “just spiritual” people. Unfortunately, it also seems to hold no less true for the many today who continue profess Christ but, frankly, aren’t acting like Christians

anymore. Did you notice the “Jesus Saves” banners being waved alongside the Confederate flag and the Stars and Stripes by some of crowd mobbing and then vandalizing our nation’s Capitol Building? Or those holding Bibles aloft or cradling them in their arms? What were they thinking?

I know that Jesus had his moments of anger and pique at the Great Jerusalem Temple where he overturned the tables of money traders and pigeon sellers. (*Matthew 2:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45*) Yet did the Jesus banner-wavers at the U.S. Capitol really imagine that they were representing Christ well to America or the world? Is this the way that “Christian soldiers” behave, smashing into a place and then taking selfies? Ultimately, people have died, as many as five, including one Capitol policeman, as a result of the assault on the Capitol.

There is a desperate, apocalyptic quality to what has gone on of late in the many capitals of our state and nation, as if the end of the world is coming unless we stop it now, and by any means possible, democratic or not, Christian-spirited or not. It all reminds me of the radical Jewish Zealots of Jesus’ day and in the immediate generations that followed. In 70 A.D., they actually staged an insurrection against Rome to force God’s hand in expediting the coming of the messiah and arrival of his kingdom and reign on earth. As Jesus could have told them, and indeed partly warned everyone in words spoken outside the Great Jerusalem Temple, their brash, rash action would lead only to the most terrible destruction. (*Mark 11:15-18; Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45*) The Great Jerusalem Temple, the entire City of Jerusalem, and even the Jewish nation ended up completely obliterated. Today, the only remnant of the Great Temple which survives is appropriately known as the “Wailing Wall.” In fact, it was almost two thousand years before the Jewish nation was reconstituted.

In the United States those who sow distrust and discord and promote violence, even in the supposed name of Jesus, reap a whirlwind, because, acting on impulse, they don’t think things through and anticipate the consequences. Significantly, in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the time of his own arrest, Jesus chastised one of his own disciples who had just cut off the ear of a soldier who had come to seize him: “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said. “Those who live by the sword die by the sword.” (*Matthew 26:52*)

Congregation, our nation as a people together, but also as individual men and women, need to step back from the edge where we’ve put ourselves. That especially includes us as Christians. It may go against the grain of this nation of ours where few can sit still without fidgeting. Yet we need to more reflective, more contemplative. It’s past time for a fearless moral and spiritual inventory—where we really look at ourselves and consider what we’ve become and where we’re headed if we continue down the same roads that we’ve been taking.

If you know your Bible, you know that all the bald “rights talk” that gets brandished about so freely today isn’t Christian. In our hallowed Christian tradition, the call for human liberty and freedom has always been tempered by an equal demand on us to be humble, responsible, and

loving. In his own ministry Jesus stressed our duty to serve others rather than ourselves. (*Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 6:34; Mark 10:45; John 13:34*) In the same spirit, Jesus also warned us against becoming obsessed with the things of this world, saying, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul?” (*Mark 8:36; Matthew 16:26; Luke 9:25*) That goes for money and material things. But it also applies to politics. In fact, politics isn’t going to save any of us. Only Jesus can.

It may sound simplistic. Yet we need to get back to Jesus, making his way our way forward, while avoiding the distorted interpretations of the gospel that led some of those assaulting the U.S. Capitol to wave Jesus banners or flash Bibles. I cherish the assurance that Jesus provides us in our morning gospel lesson: “If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees nor knows. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (*John 14:15-17*)

In a crazy time like our own when people claim they don’t know what’s true anymore, Jesus lets us know that if we love him and obey his command to love others, the Spirit of Truth will come to us. As he promises elsewhere, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (*John 8:31-36*) In our morning gospel passage, Jesus also makes clear that whoever keeps his commands is the one who truly loves him. (*John 14:21*) Conversely, if we’re not loving and gracious towards others as he commands us to be, we don’t really love him either. Our faith just becomes a masquerade or a charade which, sadly, is what is happening among too many self-proclaimed Christians today.

The Apostle Peter, originally named Cephas, wasn’t always the brightest guy. But there was a reason why Jesus prophesized that he would be the “rock” for his church and conferred on him the name “Peter,” which means “rock.” (*Matthew 16:18*) For one, Peter was big-hearted. Secondly, when Peter finally grasped what Jesus was teaching he really grasped hold of it and did his best to live it with integrity and determination. We see this reflected in his remarks from a letter or epistle Peter wrote to fellow Christians. Found at the back of our New Testament with other letters, it serves as our second lesson for today.

In his letter, Peter pointedly calls upon us to be “like-minded,” sympathetic, loving, compassionate, and humble. (*1 Peter 3:8*) He then adds: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this”—in other words, this way of life, “you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” (*1 Peter 3:9*) Making clear that this isn’t just his own opinion, Peter invokes not only the implicit authority of Jesus Christ but the Old Testament psalmists before him. From Psalm 34, Peter quotes: “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it.” (*1 Peter 3: 10-11; Psalm 34: 12-16*) Peter goes on to ask us to treat others with “gentleness and

respect” even when they don’t respect our devotion to Christ and “speak maliciously against [our] good behavior in Christ.” (1 Peter 3: 15-16)

Peter makes clear that the reward for our forbearance and loving ways following the example of Jesus Christ is great. In this life we gain a greater sense of intimacy with Jesus which can be wonderfully sustaining—a powerful source of comfort and strength for us. Moreover, in life to come, we will have, thanks to our faithfulness to the loving way of Christ, the joy of being completely united with Jesus in God’s presence, along with the saints in their light. (1 Peter 3:18, 21-22)

As Peter affirms, this promise of eternal life with Jesus reinforces our sense of intimacy with him here and now. Knowing that we are walking with Christ now and have a wonderful destiny with him ahead of us can help us set aside fear, worry, and anxiety--no matter what our present problems and challenges may be. It blesses us with inner peace, calm, and confidence. Fulfilled in this blessing is Jesus’ promise to the faithful as recorded by the Apostle John in the close of our morning gospel lesson. There Jesus declares: “Peace is what I leave you. It is my own peace that I give to you. Do not be worried or upset. Do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Yes, all of us can find greater strength and hope for our lives if we turn to God and his wisdom more. If each of us in daily life will focus on showing and sharing greater love in the spirit of Jesus Christ, we are going to be less prone to the anger, bravado, cynicism, frustration and despair which, in the face of COVID-19 and so much political confusion, corrodes our nation’s life.

You have heard it said that you can please some of the people some of the time but not all the people all the time. This morning I want to leave you with a different, more faithful line of thinking. Namely, this. If we do our best as Christian men and women to respond to others with love and sympathy, even as we stand up for what our conscience tells us is right, we are going to be happier with ourselves and serve more people for Christ than we can imagine. As we honor Christ and his spirit in this way, all the greater will be our personal peace. And our nation and world will be a better place because we have been less selfish and worldly in what we say and do and how we relate to others.

In a time beset by suspicion and distrust and caught up in tumult and confusion, loving God and one another, just as Jesus taught, will restore clarity, purposefulness, and serenity to our lives. **Amen.**