

Pastor Jeff's Favorite NT Lesson"

Roman 8:28-39

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

February 9, 2020

In the title lines of every manuscript from which I preach, I type the words "Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)". The computer recognizes the words Christian, and church, and disciples, and Christ, so it gives no indication that any of them might be incorrectly used. Not so with the word Hyattstown. The computer always underlines the word Hyattstown in red, as if it is not recognized, as if it is a mistaken part of a congregation's identity—as if Christians who claim to be among Christ's disciples could not possibly be found in Hyattstown. .

Hugh learned Thursday evening that Pastor Jeff was selecting a different favorite NT passage than he had originally selected—of course there is not one favorite, but a few. Pastor Jeff learned from Hugh that to make a change was okay, because Sunday's bulletins had already been printed, and the Biblical readings would be, as usual, from the lectionary, anyway.

The change is prompted—yea, demanded—by the events of the week, one of the most momentous weeks of the Pastor's 50 years in ordained ministry. Events of this past week demand a strong, straightforward pulpit, for events of this past week have put the veracity and integrity of every American Christian's faith on trial. Today I must speak in defense of the faith to which we ascribe, to which we all try mightily to adhere. Our faith is being assailed from the most unlikely of places. Our faith is being assaulted from the most unqualified of sources.

The text that is substituted this morning is one that I relied upon when preaching a trial sermon before you three years ago. It is the record of the Apostle Paul offering encouragement to the congregation in Rome:

READ THE PASSAGE in Romans 8:31-39

I have stood strong and straightforward in pulpits before—against my nation’s interventions in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, against the sinfulness of racism, against a homophobic church—always in the honest attempt to apply the principles of my faith to the current events of the day. I had not ever thought that the principles of my faith themselves could come under siege in a nation founded upon the idea that citizens are guaranteed the free expression of religion without discrimination.

To my memory, regarding any of those aforementioned issues, I have not purposely identified political leaders by name, for good or for ill, from the pulpit. I do not intend to do so today, though you will surely know of whom I speak, and by now you know of my political leaning. This is the important, honest truth: Today’s sermon is not about politics. Today’s sermon is about the veracity and integrity of every American Christian’s faith—yours and mine—being on trial. Incredibly enough, two and a half centuries after the Constitution of the United States, revered worldwide, was ratified, the integrity and veracity of every American Christian’s faith is on trial.

The faith feud was initiated midweek with the tormented testimony of a Senator whose life-long religious devotion as a Mormon cannot possibly be derided. But it has been, because he dared to vote for the conviction of an impeached President of his own party. The anguished Senator explained publicly: “I swore an oath before God to exercise impartial justice. I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am. I take an oath before God as enormously consequential...My promise before God to apply impartial justice required that I put my personal feelings and political biases aside...My vote is an act of conviction.”

The next morning, at the annual National Prayer Breakfast that seems to be gradually departing from its neutral non-partisan beginnings, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, a life-long

practicing Catholic, prayed for America's poor and marginalized. She had, a few weeks ago, stated that she prays regularly for the President.

The clergy leader of the Breakfast, acknowledging the political tension that had imposed itself on the menu, expounded upon the tough command of Jesus, to "love your enemies."

The President, perhaps fairly described as a lapsed Presbyterian who rarely worships, declared: "I don't like people who use their faith as justification for doing something that they know is wrong...Nor do I like people who say, 'I'll pray for you,' when I know that is not so."

So much for "loving your enemies!"

That afternoon, a White House gathering of supporters cheered as the President continued what one headline called "The Negation of the Christian Ethic". Today's sermon is not about politics. Today's sermon is about the veracity and integrity of every American Christian's faith—yours and mine—being on trial.

Take courage! As the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the people of the church in Rome, there may arise challenging, even frightening circumstances in our world, but not one of them would separate us from the love of God which is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord. God is with us even when—perhaps especially when—our faith is assaulted.

The week before this public faith feud commenced. I saw the film "A Hidden Life". The title comes from the words of the 19th century English novelist and poet George Elliot, the pen name of Mary Ann Evans: "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts: and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

The movie tells the true story of Franz, an ordinary farmer in the Austrian Alps during World War II. Franz and his wife Fani are people of strong faith and modest resources, raising two young daughters as the unrelenting power of Hitler's Germany overtakes their quiet village. A pacifist, Franz is conflicted when he receives the inevitable draft notice. Unlike other conscripted men, he would not salute Hitler. The family is insulted and shunned by their friends and the village leadership, who have all capitulated. Franz is arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and ultimately executed. He had refused numerous opportunities to save himself by pledging loyalty to the German cause. Franz paid the ultimate price of loyalty to God.

"I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am. I take an oath before God as enormously consequential"

But...there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord! God is with us even when—perhaps especially when—our faith is assaulted.

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This is about the integrity and veracity of every American Christian's faith on trial.

"I take an oath..."