

TAKING SIDES
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Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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The prophet Isaiah spoke harshly against the hollow patriotic rituals of his people, represented in this first lesson by the word “fast,” a dietary practice to make one seem pure in more ways than one. “Fast” doesn’t quite convey the import of Isaiah’s criticism. In that society, “fasting” would have been considered more of a “patriotic ritual” than a “religious” one. So I’ve substituted “patriotic rituals” for the word “fast” in this lesson. By the way, we have our own patriotic rituals including one you’ll see tonight as prelude to the Super Bowl.

Listen up people: you are serving your own interests with your patriotic rituals while oppressing your workers. You flaunt patriotism only to quarrel and to fight.

But is not this the patriotic practices that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? When you do such things your light shall break forth like the dawn. (Isaiah 58:1-12)

In other words, it’s not enough to be patriotic. Love of one’s own country is good, but it is too small a thing. It’s not good enough.

And now this from the Sermon on the Mount.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel basket, but rather on a stand so it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-20)

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My one and only brother Jerry died nine years ago. He was eight years older than me. We lived in the same house, went to the same church and read the same Bible. But we lived in different worlds. We fiercely disagreed on nearly everything. He was on one side. I was on another.

He loved Doris Day, Perry Como and the Kingston Trio. I loved Janis Joplin, John Lennon and the Rolling Stones. He supported the Vietnam War. I did not.

He thought Martin Luther King was a communist agitator. I thought King was a saint. He admired Richard Nixon. I admired Eugene McCarthy.

He loved Jerry Falwell. I thought Falwell was a satanic agitator. He was a proud fundamentalist. I am not. He read the Bible literally. I do not.

He thought the renowned anti-fundamentalist preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick was a heretic. I’ve picked Fosdick’s hymn to conclude this sermon.

My brother regularly read my essays in the *Good News Paper* and often sent them back with words scrawled in the margins: *WRONG, WRONG, WRONG. Or, SAD, SAD, SAD.*

My brother would have cast his ballot for the current president. And in case we are under surveillance this morning, I want to be clear: *my brother did not vote. He's been dead for nine years.*

Despite my appeals to their Christian sensibilities before the election, my brother's wife and children cast their lot on the dark side. *Families!* God help us. You can't *deport* them and it's too late to *abort* them so you just gotta learn to love them.

Somehow.

But it's not easy, as many of you know.

None of us like to take sides in our family, in our church, or in our nation. I'd rather not. It makes me very uncomfortable. But when sides are unavoidable, we must choose. And when competing visions and agendas for our nation clash, we must choose.

Before the election I did not declare publicly for any side. Ministers and churches are forbidden by law to endorse a party or a candidate during an election. At the National Prayer breakfast on Thursday, the current President threatened to "destroy" that law, the "Johnson Amendment." I happen to respect the current law and have always honored it.

But now the election is over. Yes, we must somehow love the president and be kind but that doesn't mean we condone inflammatory rhetoric, hurtful policies, foolish decisions or attacks on the ideals that make America truly great.

The president claimed in his inaugural address to lead "an historic movement the likes of which the world has never seen." Its marching orders are: "*America First.*" *The rest of the world be damned.*

I am not on that side.

I am on the side of a different historic movement, a movement launched by Jesus in the "Sermon on the Mount" and shaped by the deep tradition of the Hebrew prophets like Isaiah. Its marching orders are: *Love First. May the world and all nations be blessed.*

Taking sides is nothing new. Jesus himself took one side against others. As a first century Jew under the occupation of the brutal and oppressive Roman Empire Jesus faced four competing sides, representing four different political postures and strategies.

One. We must fight the enemy with fire. Take up weapons. Kill the enemy, said the *Zealots*. That's not for me, said Jesus. Violence only breeds more violence.

Two. We can't win; it's hopeless. So let's run away, hide in the desert, pray and hope for the best, said the *Essenes*. No, said Jesus. I'm not hiding.

Three. We can't beat 'em; so let's join 'em. Let's work in the Green Zone with the Romans, said the *Sadducees*. Swallow your dignity and integrity. Be safe. Get rich. No, said Jesus. I will not betray my integrity or my people.

And four. We can't win. Resisting is futile and compromising with infidels is demeaning, so suck it up, said the *Pharisees*, a word, by the way, that literally means, "isolationist" or "separatist." Suck it up. Let's live within society but unto ourselves,

make our own lives holy and pure and leave the rest to God. No, said Jesus. Holiness, piety, patriotism and even integrity are not enough.

Jesus refused to take any of those sides. The sides are similar today, just with different names and slogans.

In the “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus proclaimed a new way forward. He launched a revolutionary counter movement against the violent, racist, misogynistic, xenophobic movements many of his own people embraced—to his great sorrow.

Jesus said: Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Love your neighbor as yourself and while you’re at it, love your enemy, too. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine.

I’m on that side. And I’m pretty sure all of you are, too.

And so I say to one and all: Let your little light shine. Hold it high. I know, I know. You could feel self-righteous doing so. So what! That’s no excuse to snuff it out. If you wait for moral perfection you’ll never do any good.

I don’t care how self-righteous you feel: *hold that little light up.*

Well, actually, I do care about self-righteousness. So while holding your little light up, by all means, work on being humble. And while you’re working on humility, for heaven’s sake, keep standing up.

And speaking of standing up, let’s stand up now and sing this anthem by one of my favorite heretics.

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Hymn 307

“God of Grace and God of Glory