Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Third Sunday of Easter

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CHRIST, CRUCIFIED AND RISEN Luke 24:36b-48

For a long time now, I have been troubled by something taking place in American Christianity that I find most difficult to understand. And that “something” that I find so difficult to understand is the fact that a majority of American Christians find it in their hearts to excuse the unethical behavior of our political leaders.

Michael Gerson, himself an evangelical Christian, in a recent article in the Atlantic Monthly puts it bluntly. Speaking of Christian supporters of Donald Trump, he writes:

Trump supporters tend to dismiss moral scruples

about his behavior as squeamishness over the

president’s “style.” But the problem is the

distinctly non-Christian substance of his *values.*

Trump’s unapologetic materialism—his

equation of financial and social success with

human achievement and worth—is a negation

of Christian teaching. His tribalism and hatred

for “the other” stands in direct opposition to

Jesus’s radical ethic of neighbor love. Trump’s

strength-worship and contempt for “losers”

smack more of Nietzsche than of Christ.

*Blessed are the proud. Blessed are the ruthless.*

*Blessed are the shameless. Blessed are those*

*who hunger and thirst after fame.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

How can this be? That President Trump appears to support issues dear to the hearts of American evangelical Christians cannot fully explain why so many American Christians support him, and at the same time excuse the values he holds and the behavior he exhibits.

I have come to believe that a misunderstanding of Christian faith itself lies at the heart of this strange alliance between so many Christians and political leaders who appear to stand in opposition to the values that Jesus taught and lived. I have noted (I may be wrong but perhaps not) that many American Christians seem to avoid the Jesus of history, that is, the Jesus who taught the values of the Kingdom of God and who also lived those same values. I’ll admit it – from time to time I listen to the TV preachers, and what I have found over the years is that in their preaching they neglect the life and teachings of Jesus. They focus on his death, specifically that he “died for our sins,” but little mention is made of the radical ethic of neighbor love that Jesus taught and lived. Jesus taught that we should welcome the stranger, which he himself did when he had table fellowship with outcasts. He taught us that the word “neighbor” is an expansive term. It includes every human being we meet. He taught us to love our enemies. He taught us to turn the other cheek. He taught us to not worry about our material possessions, but rather give them to the poor. He taught us that we cannot serve both God and wealth. He blessed the poor in spirit, the humble, the peacemakers, the merciful, the sorrowful, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We could go on, but you get the point. It was these values that got Jesus in trouble with the religious authorities of his day, which in turn led them to call for his death. Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, complied and Jesus was crucified.

Surely, the values that Jesus taught and lived are the values that must hold us together as a Christian community. They are difficult to follow for sure, and none of us follow them well. Perhaps that is why many Christians would just as soon not talk about them. But we cannot abandon the words and deeds of Jesus just because they seem impossible to follow. We simply cannot avoid or abandon the life, the ministry, and the teachings of the Jesus who lived and walked upon the face of the earth. Yet, it seems that for many Christians, the values that Jesus lived and taught are not all that important as long as political leaders support the “hot button” issues they support.

It seems that American Christianity has become more focused on the Christ of faith than the Jesus of history. Both are important and necessary- both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The Jesus of history is the Jesus who lived in Palestine at the beginning of the 1st century. The Christ of faith was given birth in his resurrection from the dead. We cannot separate the two.

It is time for the preacher to turn to the Gospel reading for today, which I find most revealing and helpful. It is Luke’s story of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples following his resurrection. When Jesus appears, the disciples at first think that he is a ghost and they are filled with fear. But then Jesus shows them his hands and his feet with the marks of the nails and says to them, “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And then to add emphasis to the fact that he is the same human Jesus who lived among them, he asks them if they have anything to eat. And then we are told, “They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.”

Not for a moment are the disciples to think that the resurrected Jesus is a different being from the human Jesus they had known and followed. The resurrected Jesus is the same Jesus who died on the cross. They are to keep the connection between the risen Christ and the crucified Jesus, the human Jesus whose teaching and whose deeds led to his death. The risen Christ is the same Jesus who died. Fred Craddock, in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke says that if the Jesus who died is replaced with the risen Christ, then Christians can easily “take on forms of spirituality that are without suffering for others, without a cross, without any engagement of issues of life in this world, all the while expressing devotion to a living, spiritual Christ.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, perhaps put more simply, we cannot profess a risen Christ without following the Jesus who died on the cross, which means that we will do our best to hold fast to the values Jesus taught and live the life Jesus would have us live. That is why we choose to leave the cross of Holy Week here visible for all to see. Easter does not wipe out the reality of Good Friday. The risen Christ does not replace the Jesus of history. If this is true, we surely cannot condone the behavior of political leaders or anyone, for that matter, whose lives and values stand in contradiction to the radical ethic of neighbor love that Jesus taught and lived.

Please understand – by saying this today, I am not trying to establish ourselves as somehow superior to those Christians who are led to endorse and support political leaders whose values Jesus himself might question. We all stand in need of the forgiveness and mercy of God. No, I am saying this so that as for us, we will, as best as we can, hold fast to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and perhaps, by the grace of God, do our part to preserve an authentic Christianity for our time and our place. Let us never abandon Jesus, crucified and risen, in whom we have placed our trust and commitment, and who never stops calling us to faithful discipleship. May we say “yes” to the calling, fear not the falling, and trust in God’s leading, today and always. May it be so. Amen.

1. Michael Gerson, “The Last Temptation,” The Atlantic Monthly, April 2018, 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)