

“What About Jesus?”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, August 23, 2020

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/

Scripture Texts:

Matthew 16:13-20 [NLT]

OPENING – The Scripture Texts

Noah Sweat’s “Whisky Speech”

Sweat was a member of the Mississippi legislature when he gave this speech in 1954. The "Whiskey Speech" ...[addressed] the question of the prohibition of alcoholic liquor, a law...[concerning which] was still in force in Mississippi at the time the speech was delivered.

I bring you Mr. Noah Sweat:

My friends, I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this particular time. However, I want you to know that I do not shun controversy. On the contrary, I will take a stand on any issue at any time, regardless of how fraught with controversy it might be. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. All right, here is how I feel about whiskey:

If when you say whiskey you mean

- the devil's brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster, that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, yea, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children;
- if you mean the evil drink that topples the

Christian man and woman from the pinnacle of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation, and despair, and shame and helplessness, and hopelessness, then certainly I am against it.

But, if when you say whiskey you mean

- the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips, and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes;
- if you mean Christmas cheer;
- if you mean the stimulating drink that puts the spring in the old gentleman's step on a frosty, crispy morning;
- if you mean the drink which enables a man to magnify his joy, and his happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life's great tragedies, and heartaches, and sorrows;
- if you mean that drink, the sale of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars, which are used to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our pitiful aged and infirm; to build highways and hospitals and schools, then certainly I am for it.

This is my stand. I will not retreat from it. I will not compromise!

Let us pray: “May the words of my mouth and the medications of our hearts...” (Psalm 19:14, paraphrase)

SERMON THOUGHTS

Having been duly admonished by Alexander Pope and his well-known line: "...fools rush in where angels fear to tread", here we go!

We officially enter the election season at the end of this coming week, with the conclusion of the Republican National Convention. The two Presidential tickets will be defined officially at that point, and the contest will begin in all its, sadly, ugly earnest – in the social and mainstream media, if nowhere else, but also in commercials, ads, soundbites, late-night entertainment, and the incessant, 24 hour cable and radio news talk shows.

You have to know that I did not time this worship series to begin today with that fact in mind! It just worked out that way...

And, while we should not diminish our faith by confusing it with politics, as too many are wont to do these days on a host of issues, candidates, and ideologies, we must put our faith in the service of informing and directing our politics and political decisions. Because sometime prior to November 3rd, all of us 18 or older will not just have the right but the privilege and the civic responsibility to weigh the options and make our choices.

As we approach that awesome responsibility, one question that we should have a well-thought-out answer for is, "What shall I use as my scale for judgment?"

Now, I can anticipate some of you asking me, "Is this worship series going to be all about politics? Because

if it is, I'm out of here." In answer to that, I'd like to style my response after Noah Sweat:

IF by "politics" you mean

- *that bitter bile that turns the stomach of all who prefer polite conversation*
- *that hubris that attempts to control by slim margins the thought and conduct of all*
- *that divisive wedge that would drive apart the dearest of loves, the fastest of friends, the tenderest of affections between mother and child*
- *that disrupter of discourse whereby otherwise rational and level-headed women and men are driven to explosive reactivity or reduced to the boiling seething of the fiend, then my answer is an unequivocal "No!"*

But, if by "politics" you mean

- *that Queen of the social sciences, that enabler of clear comparisons between differing points of view and strategies for addressing the needs of society*
- *that lofty discipline that supplies structure to far-ranging ideas and opinions for the betterment of all peoples, tribes, communities, and nations*
- *that power that is capable of bringing organization and direction to the most undisciplined of human enterprises*
- *that sophisticated reflection that would inspire the articulation of the highest ideals and schemes by which women and men might elevate the station of their fellows*
- *that courage that alone is capable of confronting and redeeming the basest ambitions of all who*

would govern Adam's unruly race, my answer is an unambiguous "Yes!"

This is my position. It is where I stand. I can be no more resolute!

With my misstep in late May as a backdrop, I here want to assert my desire to not further divide a congregation and community, the members of which already too easily demonize those whose views don't align with their own, myself included.

But we cannot separate religion and politics when it comes to Jesus and "the Kingdom of God". This was an incendiary, alternative vision of human community that flaunted the military, economic, and governmental might of the Roman Empire and the centuries-old religious traditions and authority of His own Jewish leaders. And Jesus' refusal to equivocate on His politics and religion got Him killed by those two expressions of power inside of three years.

We have so sanitized, tamed, and reduced Jesus to someone made in our own image and likeness, co-opted Him as little more than a mascot for "our team", and assumed that in fact, our ways are His ways and our thoughts His thoughts (contra Isaiah 55:8-9) that we can no longer hear – if we ever could –

- how radically confronting and penetrating His call for righteousness really is!
- how upending of the conservative powers that be His passion was!
- and yes, how restrained and disappointing His activism was for the far-left Zealots, the Iscariots

– the dagger bearing, banner carrying insurrectionists of His day.

Jesus advocated a way of being in relationship with God and each other that humbled them all and called ALL to account before God without taking sides, without being forced into adopting humanity's framing of the conversation. He chose the cross instead. And He calls us to no less, if that's what it takes when it comes to living godly lives.

After all this preamble, what scale of judgment we use to evaluate the options before us comes down to Corey's / Charlotte's challenge to us to identify in the Scripture reading one of the most important questions we Christians should have an answer for. And not just any answer, not even Peter's answer, robust and pleasing to Christ as it was. Our answer...hopefully, equally pleasing to Christ.

TO THE SCRIPTURES: "Who do YOU say that I am?" Or, as the sermon title asks, "What about Jesus?"

How we answer that question will dictate

- how we conduct our conversation;
- how we formulate our opinions;
- how we decide who is worthy of our support, i.e., our vote;
- how we judge between good and evil, truth and lies, integrity and vain ambition

And it will evoke from within us our values, our priorities, what makes us feel whole, and what breaks our hearts.

We must, if we are to have any hope of being God's people possessed of honesty and integrity, come to terms with that penetrating question, "Who do YOU say that I am?" And we must care about, understand, and adopt what Jesus cared about and promoted as that which was and is closest to the heart of God. Jesus used the shorthand, "God's Kingdom/Kingdom of Heaven" and "God's righteousness" to indicate that which is closest to the heart of God.

Over the course of the next 9 weeks, we are going to unpack as faithfully as possible the Biblical dynamics of what Jesus envisioned as the "Kingdom of Heaven". We'll do this by exploring 8 of those dynamics in the form of questions:

1. the Neighbor Question,
2. the Image Question,
3. the Truth Question,
4. the Power Question,
5. the Fear Question,
6. the Caesar Question,
7. the Peacemaker Question, and
8. the Disciple Question.

Hence the name of the worship series: *Jesus' FAQ's on the Kingdom of Heaven*. After all, how can we pray with integrity, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done..." if we have no idea what those words imply?

And we will find at the close of this worship series nine weeks from now a surprisingly big tent under which conservatives *and* progressives, Republicans *and* Democrats, have a place. Because conservatives *and* progressives can embody Kingdom values as easily as either can embody their exact opposites.

The issue isn't which perspective is right; the issue is what aspects of both align with Kingdom living and which do not. As Christians, we adopt those from both that align and reject those from both that do not.

And we choose as leaders between and among imperfect, flawed human beings those through whose values, priorities, language, and conduct we see the clearest view of the Kingdom of God. (*cf. CS Lewis' "There is only correct answer to a 'sum', but some are closer than others" in this context.*) That is, we choose this way depending upon how we answer Jesus' question, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

I am not standing in judgment or promotion of one candidate, perspective, issue or anything else in embarking on this series at this time. I am merely saying that the scale we use to make our decisions matters, and it matters a lot. And I am offering to the best of my ability in the coming weeks an exploration of that scale that I find most helpful and most faithful in weighing our options. And it all begins with a serious consideration of Jesus' question, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

CONCLUSION

The funny thing about all this is how frustratingly complex and elusive "Kingdom living" can be and, at the same time, how simple and accessible it can be.

Anna's Children's message highlighted it: We can't be light to the world if we're not plugged into His power source. We cannot shed any light except that which God first shines in and through us.

If Jesus had been a physicist He wouldn't have said,
"You are the light of the world." He'd have said,
"You are refractors of the Light of the world." 😊
(*Explain this briefly with humor*)

The Scripture thread, or common verse that winds its way through this whole series is one from Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount", in Matthew's Gospel:

"...seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Not to take anything away from Jesus, but I love the way CS Lewis put it:

"Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in,' Aim at earth and you will get neither."

[CS Lewis as quoted by Peter Wehner of the NY Times:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/opinion/sunday/the-political-magic-of-cs-lewis.html>]

Far better to aim at heaven in the coming season than to continue taking aim at each other!

Let us pray...

REMINDERS / Benediction

- ✓ Brown Bag Sermon Discussion Group via Zoom – link in the weekly E-blast
- ✓ Who do YOU say that I am?