



Why, Church? (Are We So Nationalistic?)

Luke 13:31-35

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In this season of Lent, we are asking the question, “Why, Church?” That’s a Why, with a comma, Church? Why are we so focused on power, institution, and why are we so self-obsessed?

I planned out this worship series with a couple colleagues, Tim and Tim, who I gather with each fall to spend time praying over the church and planning out worship for the coming months. The Tims and I meet by zoom every week to stay connected with one another. One of the Tims was curious how people would respond to the question, “Why, Church?” And so, in January, he put together a survey to invite people to express how and when they had seen the Church at its worst. He wondered, did anyone have a story to tell about the brokenness of the Church, or had they, as individuals, ever been hurt by the Church?

Ooh friends, let me tell you, he received more responses than I think he ever expected to receive. Many of those responses were not kind to the Church. In fact, some who saw the survey were so re-traumatized that they lashed out at my colleague for intentionally or unintentionally forcing them to remember and rehash the brokenness they had previously experienced. To say that the Church has made some mistakes, has caused trauma, and has been guilty of abuse is an understatement.

Perhaps this reality is no more visual than the ways in which the Church has sought to align itself with a nationalistic identity.

I feel like I have to preface this focus on the Church being wed to nationalism in a way that gives an “out” to those who do not see the Church, or perhaps themselves, as nationalistic. When using the term “the Church,” I am speaking of our global and complicated identity. I get that there are many different groups within “the Church,” some of which refuse a nationalistic allegiance, and others that very much insist upon it. Regardless of your personal, or even our congregational, preference, the reality is, from a global witness, the Church is very much seen as being tied into nationalism.

I also feel like I need to make a stark differentiation between the focus on nationalism and the focus on imperial power, which I spoke about a few weeks ago. There is a difference in the Church being connected with the power of the empire, and the Church having a nationalistic focus. For example: the Catholic Church being the state religion of Rome, or the Anglican Church being the state religion of Britain – these are ways in which the Church has associated itself with imperial power. The Church, in these situations, has the full support of the King or Emperor because the Church belongs to the empire – the Empire is in control of the Church.

On the other hand, a focus on nationalism does not necessarily mean the Church has the power of the Empire, but from a religious perspective, they believe God has given more importance to their identity than any other. For example, Zionism is a Jewish-nationalist movement that demands there be a

“Jewish state” in Israel, not simply a state of Jews. They believe in maintaining a strict Jewish-first mentality, regardless the diversity of humanity within Israel.

It is not difficult to see this focus on nationalism within our own borders. To get a sense of what this looks like within our own nation, just do a google image search for: “January 6 Christian.” It wasn’t talked about a lot in the news following January 6 because the Capital invasion stole the headlines, but in DC on January 6, 2021, a large group of people who define themselves as Christians gathered for what was called the “Jericho March.” The idea comes from the Biblical story of Jericho in Joshua 6, where the people of Israel circled the city 7 times until the walls crumbled down, at which point the Israelites conquered the city. The title of the march should in and of itself indicate what they were hoping would happen that day.

In the days following the Capital invasion, the leaders of the Jericho March officially denounced any and all acts of violence that took place at the US Capital. Yet, the images from the insurrection made it hard to hide the influence of such a group on Capital grounds. There were flags and signs throughout the mob that said, “Jesus saves,” “in God we trust,” “Jesus for president,” and many that connected our former president with religious overtones, such as: “Trump is president. Christ is king,” or “In God we trust. Stop the steal.” There was at least one person who carried a full-sized cross with him on to the Capital grounds.

Again, while the sighting of such Church-memorabilia during the insurrection may not reflect the full witness of the Church, without a question, the visibility of this event requires that much more work from the rest of us in the Church to call out the unfaithfulness of such acts. It requires some dedicated time and space to lament the brokenness of the Church, especially as such nationalism seeks to limit and maintain a witness of the church into the hands of a population that is making last-ditch attempts to maintain their personal privilege and power within the nation.

And so today, I want us to wrestle with the question, “Why, Church? Why are we so nationalistic?” If only Jesus had some guidance to help us with this question.

What’s that? Yes, he did – I’m so glad you asked.

Our text in Luke today comes on the heels of our text last week, during which Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. After he left the synagogue, he continued from one town or village to another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. The text isn’t real clear where or when this story takes place, but it comes in the narrative as Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem, where we know he will live out his final week.

The story begins with some Pharisees coming to Jesus to let him know that Herod had it out to kill Jesus. Herod Antipas was the tetrarch of Galilee – that is, the Roman ruler who oversaw the region of Galilee. He was something of a puppet king on behalf of Caesar; Rome’s Number 1 man in Judea. This wouldn’t be the first time Herod had sought to have Jesus killed. It was Herod who ordered the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem in his attempt to have Jesus killed as a child, having heard that Bethlehem was the location for the birth of “the King of the Jews.”

It's a bit awkward that the Pharisees have come to warn Jesus of Herod's ill intention. There's no hiding the fact that Jesus and the Pharisees have a love-hate relationship. Jesus teaches them to love everyone, and they hate him for it. Jesus is often seen as being in conflict with these leaders of the Jewish community, and yet, in this moment, it seems they have come to offer an honest word of concern for his well-being, saying, "Get away from here, Herod wants to kill you."

Jesus, in his cool, calm, and collected way responds, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.'"

There's two things here that are important for us to note. I want you to look at the text closely – pull out a Bible, pull up your phone, or if you're online, use the Bible tab to pull up the text. Luke, chapter 13, verses 31-35.

First off, it's important to note that Jesus calls Herod a "fox." One scholar refers to this as Jesus using the f-word – the "fox." It's Jesus' "four-letter" way of chastising Herod for being a deceitful and conning individual. Clearly Jesus doesn't care much for Herod.

But more importantly, the interpreters have done something interesting here in this text. The original text is just Greek letters – there's no punctuation included in the original Greek manuscript of the Gospel of Luke. This means that all of the punctuation we see in our translation was added in by a translator at some point.

Look closely at the punctuation beginning in verse 32. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Go and tell that fox for me ...". The translators then include a second set of quotation marks that will designate the information Jesus wants the Pharisees to go and say to Herod. Jesus is offering a verbatim statement that he wants the Pharisees to share with Herod. ... Now, look at the end of verse 33, there's another set of quotation marks, which marks the end of the statement that Jesus wants spoken to Herod.

It's an important breaking point, because it separates what Jesus wants spoken to Herod from that which Jesus is saying directly to the Pharisees. What Jesus says in verses 34 and 35, following the closing quotations, is not included in the statement that should go back to Herod. Having offered his chastisement of the Roman pawn, Jesus – in verses 34-35 – shifts his focus back on the Pharisees.

In these verses, Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

In verses 32-33, Jesus doesn't offer much of a challenge to Herod. He basically says, "if you want me, come and get me. Here's where I'm going." Jesus doesn't have much to critique when it comes to Herod, because for Jesus, Herod isn't the threat. Herod had tried to kill him before, and failed.

But to the Pharisees in verses 34-35 – to these leaders of the Jewish community who were the most strict when it came to the Jewish law – Jesus has a pretty strong statement to make. His statement

lumps the Pharisees into this larger identity that is centered in Jerusalem. Professor Jeremy Williams offers, “[Jesus’] critique against Jerusalem was akin to an American critiquing Washington D.C. In most cases, such a critique sounds general, but it is not against all of the people who live there. The critique is often directed toward particular problems that the critic observes about the way that things are and their desires for the way things should be.”ⁱ

Jesus, in this critique of Jerusalem, centers his critique around the way the Jewish leaders have treated God’s prophets, specifically around the way God’s prophets have sought to claim a more universal calling for humanity. Listen to Jesus’ statement, “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” We have seen this problem in the past, and we will see it again in the future.

In this critique, Jesus is saying, you – Jerusalem, Jerusalem – you have failed to hear God’s call for such an expansive and invitational love. They were so focused on their nationalistic and cultural preferences that they couldn’t see God’s call to move beyond their borders and ethnic identity to share more fully in the work of God in the world. And listen, this is not a message of anti-Semitism, where we blame the Jewish community for any limited vision of God’s call in the past. This is a statement against our own short-comings in the Church even still today, as we continue to narrowly define our identity into such a limited vision of what is God’s all-encompassing power.

Nationalism isn’t about claiming the power of the state. Grasping at such power is a problem we have in the Church, but nationalism is a separate problem, wherein we actually believe that God cares first, foremost, and in a limited capacity about our narrow-minded vision of who matters. Religious Nationalism is about cornering God into defending and upholding the priority of those who fit *our* prejudicial preferences. As if we can convince God that our nation matters more than others, that our borders are more sacred, and that our lives are more worthy of protection and security than the lives of God’s created children who live in other lands.

Friends, listen to Jesus’ critique of this kind of nationalistic focus. He says, “your house is left to you.” For those who want to usurp God’s invitational authority, you will be left on your own. “You,” he says, “you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’” Until you can honestly and faithfully say that anyone who comes in the name of the Lord is worthy, you will not see me again. Until you can claim that even children of God from other nations and other lands are mine ... until you believe that my love is greater than your limited capacity ... until you praise me in humble affirmation that you are not my only child ... until then you will not see me.

This is Jesus’ way of chastising such a limited vision of God’s expansive love and his way of inviting us to more fully understand the universal glory of God’s presence in the world. And yet, while the Church may have wed itself to nationalism in many ages past, we hear and we proclaim the good news today: God’s love is not limited to any one nation. God’s preference is not so minimal that only one nation may be blessed. God’s invitation to discipleship is not focused on any one small subset of the human population. In God’s image, all of humanity was created, and as such, God cares for us all. So may we hear Christ’s call and open our hearts to receive and proclaim God’s abundant love for everyone throughout the world. Amen.

ⁱ Jeremy L. Williams. “Commentary on Luke 13:31-35.” Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved March 16, 2022.