

I wanna give y'all a very quick Biblical history lesson. Once God's people made it into the Promised Land, God established a system of governance that was unusual. God installed judges to run the place. This worked for a time, but the people kept asking God for a king so they could be like other nations. God argued, saying they weren't like other nations and didn't need a king because they had God. Besides, God said, you won't like kings. But the people begged and begged and finally God relented, gave up the judges, and replaced them with kings. And so began the long, slow decline that led to a weakened people and a crumbling state that made for a delicious morsel for invading empires. They were supposed to be a city on a hill, a vineyard producing rich fruits and delicious wines. But instead, they slipped into decay. So the prophets came along, and they delivered more or less the same message: Get right with God, seek justice, love mercy, defend the oppressed. Ezekiel says avoid "pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease" and make sure to "help the poor and the needy." And in over 400 verses in scripture, many of the prophets instruct us to treat immigrants well. Over and over, the decay of God's people that the prophets pointed to was the ballooning wealth of the rulers alongside the literally ungodly suffering of those on the bottom of their society. And for the most part, the people didn't listen. And as the mistreatment of foreigners, the poor, the starving, the sick, and those who had no one to help them -- as the mistreatment of all those people grew, so did God's disappointment. Priests and kings and lawyers thrived while everyone else languished. They were rotten fruit well beyond ripe for the picking.

We were supposed to be a city on a hill, too, a vineyard growing justice and liberty and hope for the tempest-tossed. But just like that Biblical vineyard, the promise has decayed. Where once we planted vines, now we reap bloodshed and cries. I know I preach a lot about love your neighbor, and it may be confusing to hear all that Love God, Love your neighbor stuff while my sermons also take such great issue with those who cause such great harm. So let's talk about it. Loving your neighbor doesn't mean rolling over to be tread on. Loving your neighbor doesn't mean Kumbaya wins the day. Loving your neighbor includes holding people to account. When we take issue with our enemies, we remember they are human. And when the time comes for them to face consequences for what they do, it means we don't put them in cages. This doesn't mean we can't have enemies. Jesus never said that; he said if you got 'em, love 'em. And that means we treat our enemies like human beings, boorish as they may be.

Now, with all that said, Jesus' line there in Luke is tough. And I gotta admit, I've really struggled with Jesus, of all people, preaching division. It's not that we hope for division. It's that, because we try to do what Jesus told us to do, division will come and with it, enemies, too. The past five years or so have taught me more about this than I ever wanted to know. I lived under the ignorance that our society functioned because, for the most part, we all kinda had an eye out for each other. I was disillusioned pretty quickly, though, when I saw some people dying while others couldn't be bothered to endure the smallest imposition of covering their faces. As much as I want to have faith in my fellow human beings, it's getting harder. Take the number of innocents we're willing to sacrifice for the sake of snagging a few extra criminals. The latest information on ICE arrests out of the Cato Institute -- no relation -- shows that 71% of those arrested by ICE have no criminal convictions, meaning only 29% are convicted bad apples. It's one thing to deny the suffering in detention centers, but there are many who see the suffering, know it is happening, say the people there deserve it, and take glee in not just the suffering but also in purchasing concentration camp-themed merchandise to show the world just how proud they are of supporting those deeply inhumane conditions. And some of them think our outrage is funny.

I may be wrong, but I suspect many of the folks supporting this don't know what's happening or if they do know, don't know the full depth of depravity. I think many who identify with conservatism and liberalism think the conservatism and liberalism they once knew are still in play. They're not. Neither side is what it used to be. The blatant disregard for most Americans by the majority of both parties in favor of heavily lined pockets has derailed us. There are good, morally-centered conservatives trying to push back and there are good, morally-centered liberals trying to stand up. But their numbers are few, and they're lambasted by louder and more powerful voices in their own parties. It's getting harder and harder to find middle ground even with people we once agreed with. I'm no exception here, and I'm not always the most tactful in my attempts at standing up, either.

Jesus says, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" Last week, I was so proud to see so many of you at the Wampsville Courthouse. Roughly a quarter of the folks that weren't required to be there were from St. Thomas'. It was heartening to witness a slew of prophets stand in the halls of power and speak so much painful truth. I spoke, too, and the next day, I spoke with the sheriff about what I said. Now, I don't want to go into the details of that conversation too much, but I do need to own that I was not at my best. I cussed him, which pretty much cut whatever argument we were having short. I shouldn't've done that, and I've sent an apology his way.

Now, as you might imagine, I've been thinking about that moment quite a lot. And I think I've figured out what's keeping it hanging around my neck. It's a hard question, especially for someone like me that was raised with manners as a priority. I may not always live into them, but I did learn 'em. I was taught to "Yes, ma'am" and "Yes, sir." I was taught to hold doors open. I was taught not to talk about politics or religion at the dinner table. Tough for a priest, that one. I was taught to bite my tongue and not say rude things and be nice to a fault. I was taught to keep the peace, even if that meant swallowing my pride. I imagine a lot of us were taught these same things. But just like I don't think conservatism and liberalism are what they used to be, I don't think all that decorum serves the same purpose it once did, or at least not always. I think decorum used to govern our interactions with each other so we could pursue relationships and uphold our way of life and maybe even make a little progress on the side. But since the whole societal backdrop has changed, I wonder. I wonder what happens when maintaining decorum becomes more important than protecting human life? I cussed which ended any hope of that conversation continuing, and that's on me. But it doesn't change the fact that what I'm angry about is worth being angry about. And at the risk of patting myself on the back, what I'm angry about is exactly what those prophets and Jesus told us to be angry about. How is it that so many can know so much, see so much, learn so much but still can't interpret the present time?

Now, I may be wrong about the present time. I cannot tell you how much I hope that I am wrong. I want my home to be a beacon on a hill and a vineyard ripe with fruit. I want the prophets to be oversensitive alarmists. I want to be safe and have freedoms and live the life I want to live without interference. But y'all, what I want and what is real just aren't the same. And that realization is earth-shattering. I mean that, the ground beneath my feet is no longer the rock I thought it to be. So I turn to the one rock I know to be solid, constant, and true. And that's God. Following God, trying to live like Jesus, letting the Spirit blow through my life, and the prophets inspire the works of my hands, that's about the only solid rock that's left, and it's in that solid rock that my fight takes purchase. I hope you'll stand there with me. Love God, love your neighbor, and love your enemy, but keep standing for the core of who we are: seek justice, love mercy, and defend the oppressed.