Sermon for the Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 22:34-46
The Rev. Brooks Cato

I love a story. It doesn't even have to be fiction, I just love a story. There's power to story, and sometimes you can get away with telling a story that makes a hard point you can't just outright say. It's one of the ways we shape who we are as individuals and as societies. There's stories that matter to you and there's stories that matter to all of us. And as People of the Book, we should be well-accustomed to the power of story. The Hebrew Scriptures tell so much with story, with history and sometimes historical fiction; the prophets do speculative fiction; the Psalms weave poetic moments; the Gospels tell their story in their own ways; Paul builds a Kingdom through a shared mythos; John of Patmos uses science fiction as a medium for satire; Jesus tells parables. Story matters. And even if a story isn't factual it can still be true.

Take The Handmaid's Tale, for example. None of the horrific events in that book were made up; the plot is, but all the awful details're based on actual abuses throughout history. Margaret Atwood carried newspaper clippings of some of those events in case she was challenged for crafting an extreme, unbelievable narrative of a not-at-all possible future. But that supposedly not-at-all possible future is so believable, so incisive in its read of what some would cheer as women's place in society that it's been banned from schools in 10 states. The Handmaid's Tale is in good company, though. To Kill a Mockingbird, Fahrenheit 451, Catcher in the Rye, Persepolis, The Things They Carried, Nickel and Dimed, The Diary of Anne Frank -- just a handful of the thousands of books that've been banned for the truths they tell. In the US since 2021, there've been nearly 34,000 books banned -- 12,000 of those just this year.

Now, book bans are not the same thing as book burnings, I know this, but they can't be separated out, either. Both attempt to prevent certain truths from reaching an audience. Both illustrate the power of the state over creative expression. Both send a clear message that only certain kinds of thinking are allowed. One is just a lot more permanent than the other. For what it's worth, the first book burning in Nazi Germany (and the one we've hopefully all seen pictures of) occurred at the Institute for Sexual Science where LGBTQ+ issues were studied, and the "T" in that were among the first to meet with targeted attacks by that government. Just sayin'.

So I wonder, as so many shift away from bound tomes to digital copies, what would a book burning look like today? I mean, I know what burning books look like, but what would the modern equivalent be? Maybe it's as simple as a ban or a convenient server crash or a paywall limiting who can afford access to knowledge. Maybe it's a bigger societal shift that says intellectualism and expertise are so untrustworthy that just being seen with a book makes one suspect in part because nothing is more upsetting to the way things are than those who understand the way things are. Literacy is a must for healthy societies and a threat to unhealthy ones. The same is true for religion: in our space, that means Biblical literacy is necessary for a healthy Christianity. If you rely solely on the vibe that something "must be in the Bible somewhere," it's easy to hoodwink you. And American Christianity has hoodwinked this nation. The teachings of Jesus, especially to love your neighbor, have become so revolutionary as to threaten those in power. Think about that for a moment. Saying "love your neighbor" is enough to place you on the political spectrum. That one should be pretty universal, regardless of what color tie your candidate wears.

And yet, here we are in a country where you can buy t-shirts of Jesus carrying an AK-47, you can snatch food away from the hungry for being too poor, and you can shoot an infant in a WalMart parking lot and call it justified. And still some insist we are a Christian nation. Hammer those swords into plows, put that blade back in its sheath, greet everyone with peace, turn the other cheek, give to the poor, seek justice, defend the oppressed, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty -- that's all in there somewhere. And we're so far from that reality. This is no Christian nation, but if it were, it'd be no endorsement of Christianity.

There's a video getting played at certain political rallies, a video that says Dear Leader was sent by God to be our caretaker, was made by God to care for us, that God gave us him to wield a sword, turn liquid into gold, and brave the den of vipers. Y'all, that's a messiah. We've already got one of those.

That scene in Matthew unfolds in typical fashion. People with power challenge Jesus, he responds well, and then he turns the challenge back around on them. They want to know if he understands scripture, which he surely does, and he wants to put them in their place, which he surely does. And to do that, when he challenges them on the idea of a messiah, he evokes good ol' King David by quoting one of the psalms. The Apple of God's Eye, the least of the shepherds, a prophet after God's own heart, and the greatest king of Israel -- not even he was the Messiah. And if he wasn't, then who could hope to be? David was talking about someone else, someone that hadn't come yet, someone that wasn't him. David was incredible and accomplished much, but he was no messiah. And this is where Biblical literacy comes in. If you don't know who David was, if you don't know who wrote the psalms, and if you don't know how all that related to what was happening at the time, it's real hard to understand what Jesus is up to. He's not just winning a debate; he's telling a truth no one dares say out loud. There is no king on this earth, no ruler on this planet that can be called the Messiah. Only him. And if a leader the caliber of David wasn't the Messiah, then surely Herod and Pilate and Tiberius weren't messiahs either. It doesn't matter what they say, who they buy, where they claim their authority from, there wasn't a messiah on an earthly throne then, and there's no messiah on an earthly throne now, not in our very human halls of power.

And like so many books burned or banned, like so many dissidents detained or disappeared, like so many prophets shackled or shot, the last time we had a messiah tell the truth, we nailed him to a cross and buried him away. Better to hide the truth in the dark than have people find out what's real. Because truth is a threat. The machinations of the powerful intentionally blur reality, sometimes twisting, sometimes fabricating what's real, and they've done this so well for so long that we can't even agree on which truth to believe. They've made a nation of Pontius Pilates out of us, washing hands of responsibility for the unseemly direction our nation is headed in and chronically unsure of what is true.

And that's why I'm so insistent on the whole Biblical literacy thing. The speeches and the videos and the rhetoric of a macho messiah get deployed far more often to rile up Christians than the smart, measured, nurturing Christ depicted in scripture. But it's that smart, measured, nurturing Christ we follow. The Messiah's already come, y'all, and he's not in office. But he did leave us a pretty clear job: to love God, and love our neighbor.