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In our Gospel today, a synagogue leader who keeps company with Jesus's biggest critics came to ask him to heal his child who had died. Jesus didn't ask him his beliefs or political identity first – he just went with the man, no questions asked. When a desperate woman touched his cloak, hoping for healing from years of bleeding, Jesus called her "daughter" and when she is healed, he declared that it is her faith that has made her well. Jesus reassured both those people that it was, in fact, their faith that had caused healing...their faith.

Yesterday, at a cursillo event, I heard someone say *"For me, it's not really about religion, but about faith."* The conversation went briskly on, but I did wonder what she meant.

I wonder about that word a lot, actually. Faith. It's defined in so many ways, used in many more...it can be broad when we are talking about faith communities. It can be and feel quite specific when we consider our own faith, or that of another person.

Biblical faith has been said to mean belief, firm persuasion, assurance, firm conviction. Faith is confidence and assurance that the Lord is working, even though we cannot see or even understand it.

Philosophy professor Mark Wrathall says, *"Faith involves reliance and trust, and it endures in the face of doubts, whereas belief is simply something we take to be true."*

Remember what Christy told us last week about the word "impossible" – that Audrey Hepburn reclaimed that word to mean "I'm possible?" Well, could it be that is faith being convinced of something impossible...trusting it can be changed into "I'm possible?" It does seem that faith leans on trust in the grace and mercy of God, even when something seems unlikely or unrealistic or undeserved. Maybe faith is not so much believing in something being true, but believing in or trusting the someone who tells you about it.

It can be tempting to act as if we are capable of upping our faith quotient, getting better at having faith in God...as if it is something we can practice and therefore get a good grade. However, the Jewish leader and the bleeding woman and so many others who came to Jesus came with the faith, already had the faith that he would heal, trusting ahead of time and against all reason.

Commentator Stephen Butler Murray, provides a good and approachable viewpoint, *"Faith is a restorative agent unto itself, a graceful, unmerited gift from God that precedes the presence of Jesus, providing the rich and fertile soil from which the acts of Jesus may grow, may bloom."*

Yes...**a graceful, unmerited gift from God that precedes the presence of Jesus**. It provides us with a way to accept God's love and share it, a way to go forward when all evidence suggests going back or saying no. That faith may keep us coming to church, or working on overwhelming tasks, or accepting love in the midst of terrible loss. That faith that we are given, really just through God's grace, allows us to accept the largest gift of all in Jesus the Christ.

I treasure my faith. I know it to be not of my own doing, even though I can slip up in this knowledge and give myself more credit than is due. I treasure and I lean on my faith. I love sharing the worship and practice of this faith with you. I deeply resent it when our faith is misrepresented or used for wrongdoing. Which is why, when I heard about a collaboration set for today, June 11, called Preach and Pray to Confront Christian Nationalism, I was quite interested.

An organization called Faithful America describes itself as *"the largest online community of Christians putting faith into action for social justice. Our members -- Catholic, Protestant, and more -- are sick of sitting by quietly while Jesus' message of good news is hijacked by the religious right to serve a hateful political agenda. We're organizing the faithful to challenge Christian nationalism and white supremacy and to renew the church's prophetic role in building a more free and just society."*

Whew...strong language, right? But I, too, feel strong resistance to having my faith twisted and torqued to be used as a weapon against creation and against other human beings. How many times have I felt like saying, or even said aloud in the face of hateful religious rhetoric, "I am not that kind of Christian." How many times have you? Our faith in God and Jesus and Holy Spirit is worth too much to be weaponized. So, I looked into Faithful America, and found good information and links to other similar organizations, filled with people who long to hear the Gospel, the words of Jesus used in the furthering of love and justice and peace.

A few definitions and terms from Faithful America have cleared up some questions for me:

***Patriotism*** is the love of country. It is different from ***nationalism***, which is an argument about how to define our country. As Christians, we can and should love the United States—which also means working to improve our country by holding it up for critique and working for justice when it errs. ***Christian nationalism*** is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way.

The problem is, says Faith America, *when nationalists go about constructing their nation, they have to define who is, and who is not, part of the nation. But there are always dissidents and minorities who do not or cannot conform to the nationalists' preferred cultural template. In the absence of moral authority, nationalists can only establish themselves by force.*

I believe that letting Christian Nationalism hold sway or power or turn our eyes away from Jesus is dangerous to the Church and to people of every faith everywhere. We have promised in our Baptismal vows to work for peace and justice and a fair world.

When we are doing it right, says Georgetown ethics professor Paul Miller, we work "to advance Christian principles, not Christian power or Christian culture, which is the key distinction between normal Christian political engagement and Christian nationalism. Normal Christian political engagement is humble, loving, and sacrificial; it rejects the idea that Christians are entitled to primacy of place in the public square or that Christians have a presumptive right to continue their historical predominance in American culture."

When we lean into following the teachings of Jesus, of being the kind of Christians we want to be, we show up, do the work, stuff envelopes, make calls, listen and support and love. We do this because we think a guy named Jesus had good ideas about healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and welcoming the stranger.

However, the loudest, best-funded, and best-organized groups, the ones waving the cross most vociferously are working to make the world harsher, crueler, and less forgiving. Though they use the name of Jesus pretty regularly, they don't seem to be using or following his example or teachings.

Examples of this include:

- Florida's new Don't Say Gay law will stop kids who are uncertain about their sexual orientation from confiding in teachers or school counselors. (None of the failings that keep people out of Heaven are sexual.)

Other examples of this misrepresentation of God's Kingdom are

- The idea that wearing a mask in church is evidence that you don't trust God's protection.
- Fearful people being led to shut down discussion of systemic racism, to stop children from learning true American history.
- Our sisters and brothers from other nations are being lied to and used horribly to prove a point to people working for humane treatment of immigrants and asylum-seekers. Christian Nationalists are spending millions of dollars to bring fearful attention to the growing immigration numbers. This is now happening very close to home.

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You may have read a recent letter from our Bishop, in which she says, *"a private jet carrying 16 Venezuelan and Colombian migrants arrived in Sacramento last week. Then another plane carrying 20 additional migrants from Venezuela, Colombia, and Guatemala, arrived in Sacramento. We now know that both flights originated in El Paso, Texas, where these individuals were lured with a promise of work. Much like the migrants flown to Martha's Vineyard last September, these individuals boarded a plane under false pretenses, only to become pawns in political theatre.*

How is it so easy for people to believe this is ok, that this warping of the Way of Love can stand?

And what can we possibly do in response to this distortion of the Christian faith, this destructive political ideology?

We can start by remembering that Christian nationalism doesn't just attack democracy and equal rights. It also drives people away from the church. We do side with vulnerable communities, so we must very publicly reclaim our own identity and prophetic voice. We must make clear who we are...that we are THIS kind of Christian.

This next thing will be challenging, but is essential if we believe Jesus came as proof of God's love for everyone in the world. We must take the risk of maintaining rather than severing personal ties to those who don't share our views. Individuals who believe in Christian Nationalism are still Christian if they say they are. We don't know their relationship with God, and we shouldn't question their faith if we don't want them questioning ours.

When it comes to those immigrants in Sacramento being deceived and used as political pawns, we can respond in the way of love. We are called to be good neighbors. Our Bishop asks us for funding to help to care for these individuals who were dropped in Sacramento with no recourse. You can learn more about this on the Diocesan website.

We can **speak up and show up**. We cannot allow Christian nationalism to go unchecked as the only visible and vocal public representation of our faith.

We can be in prayer – not only for those suffering the most, but prayer for faith and strength to set aside our fears for one moment at a time and push back.

Here is one such prayer, from a poem by Ted Loder:

*Come, Lord Jesus,  
expand me,  
by your power, life-generating as the sea,  
to accept  
and use my power  
to do something I believe in  
and be something more of who I mean to be  
and can be.  
to inspire me to dream and move  
sweat and sing,  
fail and laugh,  
cuss and create,  
to link my passion with courage,  
my hope with discipline,  
my love with persistence.*

Amen