

Obey Jesus!

Sermon text by Steve Smith - June 3, 2018

When Brian asked me if I wanted to give a sermon this summer, I immediately and excitedly said yes, but was then quickly struck dumb about what I might want to talk about. Hoping for some divine inspiration from Google, I typed, “how to write a sermon”, and I was told by a Christian minister’s blog that a sermon should above all else inspire people to obey Jesus. Huh. That actually started firing some synapses in my brain for a couple of reasons:

1) I have spent the last 2 years trying to wrap my head around the unwavering evangelical Christian support for Donald Trump. I understand that cognitive dissonance is a necessary tool for today’s Christian conservatives, but nonetheless, it has gotten me thinking about what it means to ACTUALLY obey Jesus.

2) It reminded me of a book I read years ago called *The Politics Of Jesus* written by an African American theologian, Dr. Obrey Hendricks. This book was my introduction to Liberation Theology, a strain of Christian theology begun by an African American named James Cone and expanded by some South American Catholics in the 1950s and 60s, the idea being that Jesus came not just to spiritually redeem humanity but also to physically upend the social, political & economic systems of oppression and injustice that kept the Jewish people subordinated to the Roman Empire.

So as these ideas have been rolling to a boil in my mind recently, I thought, what the hell, I’ll use my sermon to preach about obeying Jesus.

To properly understand the teachings of Jesus, we need some cultural and historical context. We know Jesus was Jewish and that he was a prodigious scholar of the oral and written Jewish texts and traditions, so let’s take a look at the Hebrew Bible that was the bedrock of Jesus’ ministry.

The Hebrew bible begins with Genesis and the creation story then moves into the lives of individuals of great, some might even say terrifying, faith in God like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Lot, etc., but the next book recounts the Jewish people’s struggle against the enslavement of the Pharaoh in Egypt. God’s focus seems to shift from the tests of an individual’s faith in Genesis to concern for the collective justice of an oppressed people in Exodus. In Exodus 3:7-8 God says, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.” Note the lack of religious concern in God’s statement. He doesn’t say he will deliver them because they have shown obedience to him or great faith in him. We know by reading the rest of Exodus that the Jews actually had quite a hard time remaining faithful to a monotheistic God, so it would seem that the exodus from Egypt was God taking up the cause of the

oppressed for its own sake, and that the seminal event in the history of his chosen people was not even a religious act but a political one, cementing the foundation of biblical faith in justice and liberation, as this theme would recur throughout the Hebrew Bible as the Jews continued to be a conquered and subjugated people. After the Egyptians by the Babylonians, then the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, and in Jesus' time, the Romans.

In the books of Exodus, Deuteronomy & Leviticus we see God lay out the laws for his people in a distinct effort to promote social justice and economic parity, particularly concerning society's most vulnerable members: the widows, orphans, strangers and the poor in general. There are laws forbidding the charging of interest to poor borrowers, safeguarding the dignity of debtors by forbidding creditors to accost them at their homes, instructing that truly needy persons be lent whatever they needed, with any outstanding balance being forgiven after seven years, and instituting the year of jubilee, the end of a fifty year cycle, when all lands were to be returned to the families of their original owners and all bondservants released. Protecting the vulnerable from exploitation seems to be a primary goal of God's law for the Jewish people.

Some of the Hebrew Bible's most strongly worded warnings and declarations to those holding power and authority are found in the prophetic witness of the judges, prophets and psalms. Most of us hear the word prophecy and think Nostradamus, crystal balls, and fortune tellers. Prophecy as the supernatural ability to see into the future. This is the common definition, but the Biblical definition is much different. Prophetic witness is about truth telling, having the ability to see through to the core of an issue and to speak honestly to it. A more colloquial way to express it is that prophetic witness is speaking truth to power, or as Emma Gonzalez put it, calling BS.

God commanded the prophet Isaiah to call BS on the hypocritical Temple priests attempting to impress God with their fasting while at the same time disregarding the needs of their most vulnerable constituents when he said:

"They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted,' they say 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?' Yet on the day of your fasting you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a DAY for people to humble themselves? Is THIS not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"

There are many many examples of prophetic witness throughout the second half of the Hebrew Bible but the very first chapter of the book of perhaps the greatest prophet, Isaiah, summed it up simply: Do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed.

The Hebrew Bible provides much of the cultural and historical context that shaped Jesus, but what were the political and social factors of the world in which Jesus lived?

Jesus was born in a far flung corner of the Roman Empire called Judea. Rome had allowed Judea to be governed by one of its own, a corrupt despotic puppet named Herrod The Great, who did a pretty good job of keeping Judea in line for the Roman authorities. Herrod died about 4 years before Jesus was born and his kingdom, as it were, was given to his sons, who did not do so great a job keeping the impoverished and politically restless Jews of Judea in line, so Rome found it necessary to install a Roman governor, a guy by the name of Pontius Pilate.

Judea in Jesus' formative years was in political chaos. There were pockets of resistance springing up everywhere, prophets and rebels stirring up folks in villiages and towns plotting revolts against the Romans. Rome was pretty good at snuffing out these movements and making an example of the treasonous resistance leaders by sentencing them to a slow, painful death by crucifixion, nailing them to a cross in the public square for all to see, not unlike a 20th century lynching in the Deep South.

As if the Romans weren't bad enough, there were also the ruling elites of the Jewish priestly class, whose job it was, ostensibly, to be the spiritual, moral and ethical leaders of the Jews in Judea. In reality, they were nothing more than Roman puppets themselves, more interested in protecting their own wealth and status both in the community and with Rome, than in doing their jobs. KInda like congress. Jesus aimed much of his rage at these hypocrites, the Saducces and the Pharisees, whom he famously referred to as "a brood of vipers". Jesus, as prophetic witness, had no problem calling BS when he saw it, and Judea at that time was ripe for exactly the kind of political revolution he came to deliver.

Jesus spoke often of helping the poor, the widow, and the orphan, just as his Hebrew Bible commanded him to. We know the stories of his communing with lepers and prostitutes and of him famously losing his temper and driving the money lenders and traders out of the temple (which was more than likely a well planned and executed feat of protest and civil disobedience rather than a knee jerk emotional reaction, but that's a story for another time), but Jesus spoke of one thing more than any other in his ministry. 126 times in the Gospels did he mention this thing, in fact. The Kingdom Of God. What

is this Kingdom Of God? Growing up in a conservative Presbyterian church in Oklahoma, I was taught that if I was a good boy who never drank, smoked, cursed, had sex, listened to rock music or read the wrong kind of books, then my reward would be my soul's eternal salvation in The heavenly Kingdom Of God. Well, personal piety is great and all, but I'm not convinced that that's what Jesus had in mind when he preached about the Kingdom Of God. In his book, *A Theology Of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez, states, "The Kingdom brings liberation, both of the individual from sin and the poor from oppressive social structures. This liberation or salvation is not salvation in the

sense of a guarantee of heaven (Gutiérrez, 1988:143). It is rather a restoration of the koinonia (coin-o-nee-uh) or communion; the fellowship of persons with God and others (Gutiérrez, 1988:150). This eschatological hope of restoration must be expressed in the world of social revolution; the Church's task must be defined in relation to this. Its fidelity to the Gospel leaves it no alternative: the Church must be the visible sign of the presence of the Lord within the aspiration for liberation and the struggle for a more human and just society."

In other words, the Kingdom Of God exists in the present, and its manifestation is the work of relieving the suffering of the least among us. Do right. Seek Justice. Defend the oppressed.

I have two favorite Jesus stories, and they are both from the book of Matthew. The first one is the parable of the rich young man:

16 And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." 18 He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, 19 Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 20 The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" 21 Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

23 And Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

My other favorite story is some good old fashioned fire and brimstone when Jesus speaks of the final judgement

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see

you sick or in prison and visit you?’ 40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ 41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ 45 Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

I want to conclude by reading a manifesto from the end of Dr. Obrey Hendricks book *The Politics Of Jesus* that I mentioned earlier was an inspiration for this talk this morning, Dr. Hendricks says:

"It is in the spirit of Jesus the revolutionary, that we must call upon the religious and political leaders to reclaim our biblical mandate to act justly in our communities, our nation and in the world.

We call upon our government officials and elected representatives to turn from the greed and imperial ambitions of Caesar to embrace Christ’s call for us to care for those in need of care: the weakest, the neediest, those in the twilight of their days.

We call upon the politicians of America to stop the crony capitalism that enriches the few and impoverishes the many. We call for provision for all Americans of adequate health care, a livable minimum wage, and access to an education that can prepare them to be fruitful in the marketplace and to contribute to the common good of all.

We call upon our political leaders to stop their cynical misuse of religion and “faith” to support discriminatory policies, exclusionary policies, and exploitative policies. We call upon our leaders to serve justice rather than grasping for political power.

We call upon all who claim to be politicians “of faith” to return integrity to America’s political culture by embracing the same humility that moved the psalmist to pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart;/ test me and know my thoughts./ See if there is any wicked way in me,/ and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139: 23–24).

We call upon all who bear the name of Christian to reclaim the holistic spirituality that Jesus taught, not the one-dimensional imitation practiced by many in the Church that frees us from the responsibility to make justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Obey Jesus.

May it be so.