



THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MARYLAND

“One Nation Under God”

A Pastoral Word to the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland

The Rt. Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton, Bishop of Maryland
February 24, 2017

Dear sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ,

As followers of Jesus we're filled with faith, hope and love. We know we're called to do what Jesus did with joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity and more. We're called to break down walls as Jesus did, healing Gentiles and Jews alike and standing up for those who religious and civil authorities wanted to exclude or oppress.

In short, as [St. Teresa of Avila wrote](#), we're called to be Jesus' hands, feet, and eyes in being Christ's body in the world today.

Recent reports across the Episcopal Church and in our own diocese of families and loved ones being separated by deportation have cause me to write to you. We hear almost daily of the indiscriminate stopping of individuals by police or agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Just the other night I was stopped by an unmarked vehicle and asked to see my identification.

There've been several reports of bomb scares and vandalism to Jewish community centers in several states and a horrible desecration of a Jewish cemetery in Missouri. Mosques are being targeted and harassed. And there's a resurgence of white supremacist groups throughout the country.

I'm reminded of the words of the Most Rev. Frank Griswold preached at the Washington National Cathedral in 2003 marking the fifth anniversary of his installation as presiding bishop.

"If we are truly a nation 'under God,' as we say we are, then God's perspective rather than our own self-interest will animate both our national life and our being in the world," Griswold stated. "Otherwise we had better abandon that claim altogether and admit that our power is the source of our own divinity."

We find ourselves now in anxious times. The world seems to be in political and moral chaos. Renewed talk of using nuclear weapons or the use of torture brings on an atmosphere of unease. Our nation imposes a ban on travel by immigrants and refugees from some predominantly Muslim countries.

So how are we as Christians, as the church, to respond?

During the 2016 election season I confessed to you in "[Challenging the Politics of Division](#)" how I carefully avoided preaching on controversial issues facing our country for years after ordination. From my sermons you would have gotten the impression Jesus had nothing to say to our nation and its Christian citizens. I was ignoring the Gospel imperatives that call us to govern ourselves with the inspiration of our sacred scriptures and the Holy Spirit alive and in us now.

As I wrote then, I was scared to preach on political issues. I didn't want to rile up the congregants in my small church who represented the diversity of political and social views that the national polls say continue to divide us today. I liked my job, I liked getting paid, and I liked being liked. So, I found creative ways to step around saying anything that would upset a particular voting bloc in my church – be it liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, progressive or traditionalist.

The problem was I preached a reluctant Jesus and not the powerful political person he was. He didn't sign up with any partisan group of his day. Remember, even his closest followers thought he would lead an overthrow of the Roman Empire and restore Israel to prominence. But he did challenge the religious and political figures of his time with words from the Hebrew prophets and with his own actions.

Jesus challenged his contemporaries the most in the Gospel of Matthew. His sermon on the mount ([Mt. 5](#)) turns conventional thinking on its head. The blessed of God are the poor, meek, mourners, merciful, the persecuted, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. And when we get to [Matthew 25:31-40](#) we hear Jesus identifying most with the least among us; the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoners.

There are numerous references in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures about caring for the poor, widows and orphans and the alien. That informed me when Bishop John Rabb and I wrote our pastoral letter "[Welcoming the Stranger](#)" in 2010.

That same biblical foundation animates me now as I march for refugees. I called it an act of prayer. There are many different ways to pray; in silence, with beads, in corporate worship, intercessory prayer, and with our feet. Marching for "the least of these" is marching for Jesus.

There are 65 million of God's children in the world displaced by war, famine and persecution. This may be the most at any time in our history. Jesus tells us to help them. As citizens of the wealthiest country on the planet we have a special obligation to help.

In the midst of all the fear and anxiety of our times we need look no further than our baptismal covenant. We renew it at every baptism. But this may be the time to reflect on what we say on pages 304-305 of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The first three questions are about what we believe. It's our affirmation to the Apostles Creed; that we acknowledge a belief in the Trinity and Christ's church. The next two questions are about our personal relationship, about how we encounter Christ "in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers" and promising to repent and return to Christ when we drift away.

It's the last three questions that really challenge us to engage God's world by the way we live.

"Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?"

"Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?"

"Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

To all of these we answer, "I will, with God's help."

We know these are difficult. That's why we acknowledge a need for God's help. I believe that help comes in many ways but mostly through the gathered community of faith.

"What would happen if God's justice and peace were our heart's desire, and the dignity of every human being our deepest concern?" Bishop Griswold asked in 2003. "There would be a revolution, which is precisely what God's work, God's mission, is all about."

As we move through the new political climate together I remind you of my words from 2016: "The values of Christian gospel, however, are characterized by the 'fruit of the Spirit' in St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians: *'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.'* (5:22-23) The politics of Jesus, no matter what social or economic policies are being espoused or denounced, demand these values undergird both the tone of the political conversation and its proposed outcomes."

Let me restate my suggested ground rules for both ordained clergy as they preach and for those in the congregation as they listen.

A guideline for preachers

- Always preach the gospel. Respect the pulpit; don't view it as your personal political platform.
- Speak as *one* informed witness to Christ's gospel, acknowledging there are other witnesses.
- Remind your listeners that this is the beginning of a conversation you want to have with them, not the end of a needed conversation.
- Show some courage. It's easier in the long run for your pastoral ministry than cowardice.
- Be willing to listen, be willing to change your mind, be willing to repent.

A word to listeners

- Cut your preachers some slack. They really are trying to say and do the right thing.
- Acknowledge in yourself that Jesus was both a spiritual and a political teacher.
- Read the cited Scriptures, and have the conversation with God and with others that the preacher is inviting you to have.
- Be willing to listen, be willing to change your mind, be willing to repent.

If Episcopalians in the Diocese of Maryland encounter Christ in the breaking of the bread, the proclaimed Word of God, and in the gathered community of faith we can truly engage God's world in the ministry of reconciliation.

Faithfully,

The Right Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton
Bishop of Maryland