

ALL NATIONS
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January 29, 2017
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Micah 6:1-8

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

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A week ago Friday, I watched the inauguration of the 45th president and wondered what the six clergy would say and wondered what I would have said in their position. I'm not sure why, but I wasn't invited.

Three clergy spoke before the swearing-in and three after. The first one to speak after was Rabbi Marvin Hier.

He began with a citation from a certain Psalm that I happen to know and it brought me to full alert. *Oh, oh*, I said to myself, *this is a not-too-subtle stab at a certain person with a thin skin sitting behind the Rabbi who could take it as a personal attack*. I watched his face but it didn't seem to faze the sitting President.

The Psalm cited by the Rabbi happens to be the Psalm for today. Psalm 15.

O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Good question. Now comes the answer.

Only those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, who speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors. Those who do these things shall be blessed.

Those who do these things shall be blessed. As in blessed are the merciful and blessed are the peacemakers. And now this: blessed are those who take up no reproach against their neighbors—which, I would think, includes all nations near and far.

"American First" is now heralded across our land and patriotism is demanded. But love of country hardly requires a commandment. Patriotism is a natural and honorable affection for one's own country. But when patriotism anywhere is married to bigotry and belligerence it is dangerous and abhorrent. It quickly leads to nationalism.

The USA has military bases in more than 70 nations. "America First" will certainly make them a lot more nervous.

Six hundred years before the birth of Jesus the prophet Micah chided his compatriots for their jingoism and self-serving rituals to the neglect of the poor and oppressed. "Israel First" betrayed their calling to be a light to all nations.

Hear what the LORD says for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and will contend with Israel. Listen up, people. What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, love

kindness, and walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Do justice. Practice kindness. Be humble.

Humility is a virtue to be cherished and practiced. But “America First” sounds anything but.

No nation is an island entirely unto itself. No nation can thrive alone anymore than the human species can thrive on this planet alone. To dismiss or discount our interdependency in the web of life is naïve, foolish and dangerous.

Furthermore, “America First” evokes a dark and shameful era when America refused to join allies in resisting Hitler and turned away Jewish refugees fleeing the holocaust. And yet, “America First” has now become a much-heralded slogan.

The nativism represented by that slogan should make every Christian cringe. So wrote Republican Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* last week. That didn’t completely surprise me coming from him.

Gerson and I both grew up in evangelical families and attended the same evangelical college, albeit not the same years. As a child I’m pretty sure he learned as I did to sing a certain Sunday School ditty that goes like this.

*Jesus and others and you
what a wonderful way to spell JOY.
Jesus and others and you,
in the heart of each girl and each boy.
“J” is for Jesus for he takes first place.
“O” is for others we meet face to face.
“Y” is for you and whatever you do,
put yourself last and spell JOY.*

Well, it may sound trite; but it’s actually quite profound. When we put Jesus first we can’t help but put others first for Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And if that’s not hard enough, Jesus added in the “Sermon on the Mount”: *love your enemies.*

When we put Jesus first we never exclude others.

And with that so-called “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus inaugurated a radical, revolutionary movement the likes of which the world had never seen before.

But now, as you may have heard, the new president claims to have launched “an historic movement, the likes of which the world has never seen before.” It is, indeed, an historic movement but it is a *counter* movement to the Jesus movement. Similar nationalistic movements are on the rise in Europe. Britain First. France First. Germany First. The Netherlands First.

I understand the political and patriotic necessity of such rhetoric. Every national leader must put their own nation’s interests first. It goes without saying: No, national leader will ever claim to put the interest of other nations ahead of their own. It would be political suicide.

And, no, I don’t expect nor do I want this president to impose his Christian values on our nation or the world. Woodrow Wilson thought he could and that didn’t turn out so well. After all, we are a secular nation. Not a Christian nation.

The United States has no state church or state religion. And thank God for that. The disestablishment of religion was one of the most brilliant principles of our founders. They had seen in Europe what such alliances bring.

No, we are not a Christian nation with a capital “C.” But we could be a christian nation with a small “c.” Which is to say, we could be more Christ-like.

So Christians in every land should be alarmed over the rise of nationalism for those sentiments thwart the movement begun by Christ—a movement that seeks to extend compassion, inclusion, and blessings to all peoples, tribes and nations. Christians must advocate for a national posture and national policies that reflect the way of Jesus—love, compassion and respect for all nations.

As Gerson put it. The Christian church was one of the first great global, multicultural institutions. The very nature of this faith relativizes nationalism—brothers and sisters can be found across the most hostile borders, and any man or woman we encounter will outlast every country.

This movement harbors no illusions of easy success. It expects resistance, even fierce persecution and cruel mockery for the forces of fear, greed, xenophobia, racism, sexism, misogyny and hate are strong and persistent.

Jesus harbored no illusion. *How blessed are those persecuted on my account*, which is to say, on account of standing up and speaking out for the way of mercy, peace and justice for all. Our calling as followers of Jesus is to bless all peoples and all nations no matter the cost.

And finally this from Gerson: *Christians should be willing to take on the President publicly when he speaks in demeaning and dehumanizing ways. Large movements of conscience often begin in inspired groups of three or four, reaching out across divisions.*

And what of those Christians who support such nativism, he asks. His answer: *God help them. Quite literally.*

Yes, it’s OK to urge the president and other national leaders to love and respect all peoples and nations. It’s more than OK. It’s necessary. And it’s what our faith requires.