

What Would Jesus Say to America?
Jeremiah 22:3-5; John 18:33-40
July 4, 2021
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On this date, 245 years ago, the Second Continental Congress approved the final version of the Declaration of Independence, giving birth to the United States of America. It would be another month before John Hancock signed this declaration. 245 years later, we don't feel very united, and I think that bothers most of us. Division has come to describe the time in which we are living. Almost everything fits in either a red category or a blue category – no matter what the topic. And if your view on a particular topic tends toward Red, others are quick to label you as being Red, even if your views on everything else are not Red. I don't think any of us like being labeled by other people. There have been times when I've made a statement in a sermon, and someone has said, "You must be a Republican" – and to be fair, I've also been called a Democrat – and in both instances being called Republican or Democrat was not intended as a compliment. So what are we? Red or blue, democrat or republican, for or against?

Do you watch the news? There's a lot of money to be made by adding fuel to the divisions, and it's not just television but social media platforms and organizations. Division has become a huge money-maker. And if the message is fear or conspiracy theories, that just adds fuel to the division. Republicans are called racists and Democrats are called socialists. How can anyone even say that? Is that true of every Republican and every Democrat? – as if we know every Republican and every Democrat. We know better, but we get sucked into these divisions.

I have an opinion about everything – just ask Amanda. But you don't come here to hear my opinions. Some of you have told me that you would like me to share my opinion, but that's only as long as my opinion matches yours. In fact, some of us are looking for a church that already matches what we think. And you can probably find it, but I don't want to be that church. I want to be the church that invites everyone in, because that's what I see whenever I look at this cross. We gather at the cross where Jesus waits with open arms, ready to hold us together, offering values that are not associated with one political party – values that are neither red nor blue. And for the next few minutes, I'd like to lean into scripture to hear what Jesus might say to America.

I'd like us to consider three Hebrew words that we find in this morning's scripture. These words tell us what God expected of kings and leaders of Israel. God expects these three things because these three things characterize who God is. The first word is MISHPAT. It is a word that appears 421 times in the Old Testament. It is most often translated as justice – making sure everyone is getting what's right and fair. In the Bible, justice generally comes up not when people have plenty but when God is speaking about the powerless and the poor. God speaks to those in power and says, you must have mishpat so all will be treated equitably. We see this especially with the prophets when God speaks through the prophets to warn the people. Because justice was not happening, God says: If you don't pursue justice then I will. I will execute justice and if in the process you refuse, I will see that your own nation falls.

The second word is TSEDEKA. It means "righteousness": doing the right things at the right time in the right place for the right reasons. God is the standard for this, so that in every situation we are seeking what will please God. Tsedeka is doing the right things even when the law does not obligate you to do so. Do what's righteous not because you see a police car watching the traffic, ready to write a ticket, not even because the law requires it – but because God expects it from us. In the Old Testament, this was not just a personal question but a question kings were meant

to ask about their policies and their way of governing. And if they did not pursue righteousness, judgment would come.

The third word is HESED. It means “steadfast love, kindness and mercy”. It is not a feeling but an action – even when other people don’t deserve it. Loving even when a person is unlovable. Isn’t this what we expect from God?

All three of the words come together in Jeremiah 9:24 – **Those who boast should boast in this: that they understand and know me. I am the LORD who acts with kindness, justice, and righteousness in the world, and I delight in these things, declares the LORD.**

This is what describes God. It is what God expects of humanity. It is what God expects of the nations – the standard to which leaders will be held accountable. God sends a prophet named Jeremiah to speak God’s truth to power. The problem is not only that the king had forgotten mishpat, tzedeka, and hesed, but the king is complicit in acts of injustice and violence. That’s how the king had chosen to exert power and influence. But then Jeremiah offers what is essentially a life or death choice.

Do what is just and right: rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. Don’t exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan, and the widow. Don’t spill the blood of the innocent in this place. If you obey this command, then through the gates of the palace will come kings who occupy the throne of David, riding on chariots and horses along with their entourage and subjects. But if you ignore these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this palace will become a ruin.

And if you know the rest of the Old Testament story, the king didn’t listen – and the nation was destroyed – for lack of these three.

What is the American dream? Most of us have some vision of what that dream looks like. Is it a certain income or the size of your house or some measure of success? For the founders of this nation, I think the dream was somehow more basic than that. If you have a one-dollar bill, would you take it out? On the back of the one-dollar bill we see both sides of the seal of the United States. It was approved by Congress in 1782. Charles Thompson designed it. The United States is represented by the great pyramid. The pyramid represented something of enduring strength, but if you look the pyramid is unfinished. Thompson said that’s because the vision of America should never be complete. Each generation should continue working toward the fulfillment of that vision. At the bottom of the seal, we see the Latin words – **Novus ordo seclorum**, which means “the new order of the ages.” The founders saw something new – so just and right that it would change how countries functioned. Above the pyramid, the Latin words – **annuit coeptis** – “favors our undertaking”. Who does? The answer is found with the eye inside the triangle – who is all-seeing? The providence of God. Even those founders who were not committed Christians talked about God’s providence because this nation had stood up for justice, doing right and showing mercy. And to the extent we continue in that path we receive blessing. I don’t have time this morning to explain the other side of the seal, but my purpose in looking here is to recognize there are some common values between what God calls us to be and what the founders of this nation were hoping for.

What would Jesus say to America? Surely he would talk about the condition of our soul, calling us to repentance, how he saves us from our sins, changes us from inside out, and offers us eternal life. He would call us to reorder our priorities making more room for God. My hope is that’s what everyone experiences, but there’s more to the gospel. It’s putting one’s faith to work. Remember when the disciples asked him about greatness? And Jesus said, to be great, one must chose to be last, to be servant of all. He spoke of humility and compassion and love – and

he lived that way. In our nation today, we have a Republican way and a Democrat way of addressing many of the greatest problems before us. Before the pandemic, I was sitting with some friends and we were discussing some of these issues and what I found amazing is that even though I had the superior arguments they refused to agree with me! But we all agreed on the problems. Here's my hope for our nation – which I think Jesus might say to America – embrace mishpat, tsedeka, and hesed. Start here.

Last week, I finally took time to watch the movie, Two Popes. It is the story of Pope Benedict who wants to retire as Pope, something nobody has done in 700 years. He wants to retire but he also wants to be sure the wrong guy doesn't succeed him. So he will keep going as the Pope if the wrong guy is going to be Pope, and the wrong guy is Cardinal Bergoglio who is in Argentina and ultimately becomes Pope Francis. The reason Benedict doesn't want Bergoglio to be Pope is that he totally disagrees with him about everything. At the same time, Cardinal Bergoglio also wants to retire because he's tired of being a cardinal in a church where he disagrees with the Pope about everything. So he flies to Rome because he needs the Pope's permission to be able to retire. But as they start talking Pope Benedict says, I don't agree with anything you say, and I disagree with everything you say. But they spend two days together, and at the end of the two days, listening to each other and hearing their stories of what brought them to the priesthood, something changes – and the Pope decides that maybe it would be a good thing for the church to have Bergoglio as Pope. Here's that scene. Take a look [video]. This was a private conversation and we don't know if this is what they actually said, but I like that scene. "I've seen your heart. I've listened to you, and maybe the church needs what you have." And that's what happened.

When we look at each other, let's not see the enemy or even the division. We come here where the body and the blood of Jesus Christ becomes the common bond that unites us so that we can be the body of Christ here – so that we can be justice, righteousness and mercy in the world, moving this nation in that direction.

Let's pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Master, let me not seek as much
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in pardoning that one is pardoned,
it is in dying that one is raised to eternal life.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 4, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Fill me, Lord, here and now, with a deep sense of your presence and a strong sense of your empowering Spirit. Renew my faith and replenish my heart. Guide me and guide this nation to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you each and every day. Amen.

Monday, July 5

Scripture: James 3:4-10

Consider ships: They are so large that strong winds are needed to drive them. But pilots direct their ships wherever they want with a little rudder. In the same way, even though the tongue is a small part of the body, it boasts wildly. Think about this: A small flame can set a whole forest on fire. The tongue is a small flame of fire, a world of evil at work in us. It contaminates our entire lives. Because of it, the circle of life is set on fire. The tongue itself is set on fire by the flames of hell. People can tame and already have tamed every kind of animal, bird, reptile, and fish. No one can tame the tongue, though. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn't be this way!

Observation: The apostle James found one speech pattern particularly ironic. "With [our tongue] we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God's likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth," he wrote. How does this scripture apply to the present-day political environment? Part of the healing of our nation must come from the church modeling for our society how we are to love those with whom we disagree.

Application: Sociologists note that in war, soldiers use dehumanizing nicknames for people on the other side. It seems to become easier to kill people if we stop thinking of them as people, as human. In what ways have you seen similar patterns in religious or political "combat," when the "bullets" are words? Have you ever made friends with a person, then found out you hold some different views, and realized that the derisive labels you've used for "those people" may not be true? How has learning about a friend's political differences changed your relationship? Or has it?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes those who disagree with me bug me so much that I wonder where they came from. But they, like me, ultimately came from your creative heart. Help me to move toward seeing them as you see them. Amen.

Tuesday, July 6

Scripture: James 4:1-8, 11-12

What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Don't they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives? You long for something you don't have, so you commit murder. You are jealous for something you can't get, so you struggle and fight. You don't have because you don't ask. You ask and don't have because you ask with evil intentions, to waste it on your own cravings. You unfaithful people! Don't you know that friendship with the world means hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the world's friend becomes God's enemy. Or do you suppose that scripture is meaningless? Doesn't God long for our faithfulness in the life he has given to us? But he gives us more grace. This is why it says, *God stands against the proud, but favors the humble*. Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will run away from you. Come near to God, and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Brothers and sisters, don't say evil things about each other. Whoever insults or criticizes a brother or sister insults and criticizes the Law. If you find fault with the Law, you are not a doer of the Law but a judge over it. There is only one lawgiver and judge, and he is able to save and to destroy. But you who judge your neighbor, who are you?

Observation: James spoke to outward behaviors ("be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry" – James 1:19) but also to their inner sources long before modern psychiatry. He saw Romans, Greeks, Jews, and Samaritans fight, sometimes with weapons, but more often with bitter words. He challenged his readers to look inward. The apostle Paul wrote forcefully that we need to trust God to set right what is wrong, rather than trying to do it ourselves (Romans 12:18-21). James asked bluntly and succinctly: "There is only one lawgiver and judge.... you who judge your neighbor, who are you?"

Application: When you have negative thoughts about someone who disagrees with you, do you ever look inside and ask, "What does this person threaten, annoy or frighten in me?" How can we disagree while doing so in love and with respect for the other? When have you seen disagreement handled in love and respect? When have you been able to do that yourself?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I pray with the psalmist, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14) Amen.

Wednesday, July 7

Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-32

Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, *Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor* because we are parts of each other in the same body. *Be angry without sinning.* Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. Thieves should no longer steal. Instead, they should go to work, using their hands to do good so that they will have something to share with whoever is in need. Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Observation: Across our country and around the world we see the result of words that tear down community and set people against one another. Even the Christian Church faces divisions. We aim to be a community that follows Ephesians 4:29: "Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community." Changing our speech requires letting God change the inner sources from which our words come.

Application: From Barclay's commentary: "Paul sums up his advice. He tells us to be kind (*chrēstos*). The Greeks defined this quality as the disposition of mind which thinks as much of its neighbor's affairs as it does of its own. He tells us to forgive others as God forgave us. So, in one sentence, Paul lays down the law of personal relationships—that we should treat others as Jesus Christ has treated us." Which of your relationships come closest to living up to that standard? In which do you see the most room for growth?

Prayer: Lord of my life, be Lord of my words. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Thursday, July 8

Scripture: John 18:33-40

Pilate went back into the palace. He summoned Jesus and asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you say this on your own or have others spoken to you about me?” Pilate responded, “I’m not a Jew, am I? Your nation and its chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus replied, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world. If it did, my guards would fight so that I wouldn’t have been arrested by the Jewish leaders. My kingdom isn’t from here.” “So you are a king?” Pilate said. Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. I was born and came into the world for this reason: to testify to the truth. Whoever accepts the truth listens to my voice.” “What is truth?” Pilate asked.

After Pilate said this, he returned to the Jewish leaders and said, “I find no grounds for any charge against him. You have a custom that I release one prisoner for you at Passover. Do you want me to release for you the king of the Jews?” They shouted, “Not this man! Give us Barabbas!” (Barabbas was an outlaw.)

Observation: John 6:15 showed that, after feeding 5,000 people (and no doubt at other times, too) Jesus could probably have taken political power if he’d wanted to. But he hadn’t come to create that kind of kingdom. Jesus baffled Pontius Pilate, a typical Roman political climber, who asked him, “So you are a king?” Calmly contained, Jesus said, “My kingdom doesn’t originate from this world.... My kingdom isn’t from here.” Jesus came from, and ruled over, a totally different (though equally real) realm.

Application: Pilate, a tough, cynical Roman politician, thought he knew how kings behaved. In his opinion, Jesus didn’t act like a king. He was probably mocking the Jewish leaders more than honoring Jesus when he called him “the king of the Jews.” What makes Jesus the kind of leader you want to follow? In what ways does his character shape the ways you choose which human leaders win your trust and allegiance?

Prayer: Dear God, your kingdom is not of this world—but lots of my day-to-day life is. Teach me how to live out your kind of power, shown in your Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Amen.

Friday, July 9

Scripture: Acts 17:22-28

Paul stood up in the middle of the council on Mars Hill and said, “People of Athens, I see that you are very religious in every way. As I was walking through town and carefully observing your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an unknown God.’ What you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you. God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth. He doesn’t live in temples made with human hands. Nor is God served by human hands, as though he needed something, since he is the one who gives life, breath, and everything else. From one person God created every human nation to live on the whole earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands. God made the nations so they would seek him, perhaps even reach out to him and find him. In fact, God isn’t far away from any of us. In God we live, move, and exist. As some of your own poets said, ‘We are his offspring.’

Observation: The apostle Paul gave Athenian philosophers (most of whom looked down on all other people) a startling insight. He said all people, all nations, came from one creator God. We are all related.

Application: In his book, *Vanishing Grace*, Phillip Yancey said, “The issue is not whether I agree with someone but rather how I treat someone with whom I profoundly disagree. We Christians are called to use the ‘weapons of grace,’ which means treating even our opponents with love and respect.” (p. 26) Paul challenged the Athenians ideas, but showed respect by commending their devotion to an “unknown God.” How did Paul’s approach echo the way Jesus lived out God’s heart (John 3:16-17)? How can you share your faith with non-religious and nominally religious people without condemning them?

Prayer: Lord God, I believe in and trust you as a personal being who loves me and my world. Help me live and act in ways that show that your love has touched my life. Amen.

Saturday, July 10

Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-14

So remember that once you were Gentiles by physical descent, who were called “uncircumcised” by Jews who are physically circumcised. At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God’s promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us.

Observation: One huge dividing line in Paul’s world was between Jews and Gentiles. Paul had lived out that bias (Galatians 1:13-14). There was a real wall in the Temple in Jerusalem. Purity laws resulted in Gentiles being excluded from the court of Israel (for Jewish men) and even the less pure court of women (for Jewish women). Christians in and around Ephesus would know that Paul was in Roman custody because he had been accused of bringing an Ephesian Gentile beyond the temple’s outer court (Acts 21:27–29). Tribalism, nationalism, bigotry, fear, and violence are not new—they’ve been part of the human condition in nearly all ages. But Paul wrote in verse 14 that Christ destroyed that barrier in the Temple by rendering it pointless. Christ tore down the dividing wall(s) between people.

Application: On the cross Christ broke down the barriers that separate people. In a global society, we all see differences between people that trigger hostility or fear in us. Who do you find it hard to like or to trust? How does it affect your feelings when you remember that Jesus died for them, too? How can Jesus’ grace to you make you more willing to tackle the hard work of breaking down long-standing biases and actions?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you lived in an empire that saw crushing force as the only way to deal with enemies. Yet you reached out to people who were killing you and asked God to them. Tear down any barriers in my heart that keep me from caring about all of your beloved children. Amen.