

Has a Nation Changed Its Gods?

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Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Text: Jeremiah 2:4-13; Hebrews 13:1-8

Several of us had the pleasure last weekend of staffing the Caldwell booth uptown at the Pride Festival. Our thanks again to Denise Furr, Lisa Raymaker and others for organizing that effort. We had fun not just in the parade but at the booth, giving away the free raffle prizes and, I hope, showing God's love to those we met.

There is no better place for people-watching than the Pride Festival, is there? Nothing like it. You see it all. And I mean, ALL.

As I sat in our booth Sunday afternoon, I noticed the booth directly across Tryon Street from ours was the booth of the Charlotte Atheists and Agnostics Society. This was their first time at the festival. Glad to have them. They had a poster there that made me think. It read:

“There is probably no God. So go ahead and live your life and enjoy yourself.”

What we would expect, for the most part, from our atheist and agnostic sisters and brothers. But the more I looked at that sign, the more I thought to myself.

“There is PROBABLY no God,” their poster said.

“Probably”

At least they are keeping an open mind about their faith – or lack of it – an open mind and maybe a door cracked, a door into the presence of the Almighty, just in case.

This month, we have been thinking a lot on Sunday morning's about the answer to the question, “What is faith?”

It's been said that the opposite of faith is certainty. A moment ago, we heard some strong words from the prophet Jeremiah. As Phanta introduced so beautifully last week, Jeremiah was called to preach sternly to the nation of Israel. Because Israel had become certain about one thing: They seemed certain they no longer really needed God.

In fact, as we heard from Jeremiah's indictment, God's chosen people had traded the one true God for lesser gods, gods with a little “g”, gods of their own creation, gods of their own desires, gods of their own self-centered ways, gods of their own belief in themselves.

“Has a nation changed its gods” Jeremiah asks, “even though they are no gods?”

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Next week is Labor Day weekend. And in presidential election years, that means every minute counts through election day. If we hadn't had enough politics so far, well, we are about to get a double dose.

"Has a nation changed its gods?" Jeremiah asks.

In his day, Jeremiah was essentially asking, "Had the nation of Israel forgotten its roots? Had it lost sight of its identity and divine design? Had it strayed too far from its unique role among all the nations of the earth?"

The same question might be asked of us. Have we forgotten our roots, the original design of this republic?

We set out to be a nation "of the people, by the people and for the people." We were to be a land in which all its citizens had the God-given right to pursue life, liberty and happiness.

But, like Israel in Jeremiah's, we have strayed far, far off course.

When it comes to electoral politics in America, we have gods all right. It is common knowledge that elections in America, especially at the state and federal levels, have been bought and paid for. It is an accepted fact that the Koch brothers have used their billions to help win elections for men, almost exclusively white men, who advance what the Koch brothers want.

The same story goes for North Carolina. Years ago, a small handful of men with lots and lots of money set out to own politics in our state. They set up candidates. They redrew districts. They won the state house, the state senate and finally the governor's mansion. And through a methodical overhaul of legislation, they proceeded to set our state back 20, maybe 30 years, in terms of public education, a social safety net, workers' rights, healthcare, treatment of children, fair market practices and on and on and on.

Has a nation changed its gods? Has our state?

What if we had a Jeremiah?

In his day, the reluctant prophet acted as God's prosecutor, pressing a lawsuit against God's people, an unflinching accusation that they had broken the covenant God has set with them generations before. And when Jeremiah spoke for God, he spoke bluntly.

Israel's leaders had turned to Baal and other false gods. Its priests had failed to uphold the law handed down to Moses, the law that was to set Israel apart. But the failure of leadership went far beyond just religious leaders. Its kings had placed their own luxuries and royal treatment above the causes of the poor and the needy. They had redirected the nation's abundance to benefit only a few, leaving the rest to fend for themselves for the scraps that were leftover.

Said Jeremiah:

“I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.

“The priests did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who handle the law did not know (the Lord). The rulers transgressed against me, God said through Jeremiah, ‘they prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit.’”

“Therefore, once more I accuse you, says the Lord, and I accuse your children’s children.”

Stern stuff. But God’s people had it coming.

How about us?

We live in a land of plenty, literally enough to feed every man, woman and child and millions around the world. But millions of people in America go hungry while others live in extravagant excess, stockpiling billions of dollars, more wealth than could ever be spent by their children and their children’s children.

America has some exemplary philanthropists, for sure. Thanks be to God for the new breed of billionaires who have pledged to give away their wealth and leave only a reasonable sum to their families. But they are the minority. They are the exception.

Then there is this damning charge that Jeremiah leveled at the powerful of his day.

“Those who handle the law did not know me.”

Jeremiah was speaking of both religious and political leaders, of course. By God’s original design, there was one law – or set of laws - that was to shape society. The religious law was the civil law, a design for an interdependent people that lived in covenant community, where none were left behind.

“Those who handle the law did not know me.”

The same can be said in our day. As for religious leaders, the church and its leaders stand accused of forgetting what is important to God. We have some egregious religious leaders, like the one who asked his followers to help him by a new jet because the small jet he had wouldn’t do. But we also have plenty of lesser known religious leaders who fail God in more subtle ways. Anyone in my business, including me, must be prepared to face that accusation, because we all fall short in some ways.

Then there are those who make the civil law. And that bring us back to a nation that has forgotten its way. A nation where the lawmakers have been chosen, in too many instances, by those who have the power: billionaire ideologues, yes, but also other types of big money. Big corporations and big special interests, like the NRA. After all, according to the law of the land, a corporation is just like a citizen, free to exercise all the same rights in politics as you and me. Only they have all the money. And politics in America is all about the money.

And a political system that is built purely on money is like the cracked cisterns Jeremiah speaks of in today's readings. Rather than fountains of living water, those cracked cisterns can hold no water at all.

"Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit."

How should we react, we might ask a Jeremiah of our day? In his day, Jeremiah, speaking for God said:

"Be appalled, O heavens at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord."

And well we should. But we don't have it leave at that. Some may say the system is already so corrupt that Joe Sixpack, Joe the Plumber and, as I say sometimes in meetings around here, Joe Pewsitter, will never get it back.

That's true. We will never get it back, if we don't try.

That seems to be the strange irony – one among many – of this election cycle. There are those on the far right and the far left, Bernie's army and those who would anoint the man who would be king, who agree on one thing. The system is corrupt.

Like the Israelites, we have gone astray from the nation we were intended to be, one in which all citizens are able to act on their God-given right to pursue life, liberty and happiness in and through a government that is of the people, by the people and for the people. And those at the bottom of economic and social ladder know the pain of our nation's corrupted ways the most.

With so much riding on this year's elections, both Democrats and Republican seem to agree that it's time for the voice of the people to be heard. For when the voice of the people is heard, the needs of all of the people, not just the few, will be met.

Today, we launch a three-point, non-partisan plan focused on just that. We want to engage in the November election – by registering voters, by knocking on doors and by getting voters to the polls on election day. Our member, Caitlin Culp, will speak a few minutes later to explain.

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"Has a nation changed its gods?"

Jeremiah was angry with the children of Israel because they had turned away from the God of the ages, the one God, the God, as Phanta preached last week, that is unshakeable, the God who is with us in all things.

Centuries later, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews had the same message for God's people at a different time in a different place. As we have been hearing this month, the first

readers of Hebrews were struggling against the powers and influences of their time to keep their faith in Christ, to stay focused on what Christ came to do.

Christ came into the world to confront earthly powers. Some might say Jesus was not political but the opposite in fact is true. In his book, "Jesus and Politics", author Alan Shorkey writes:

Christianity asks of all rulers, "Do you act in justice and truthfulness?" The gospel subverts the structures that are not open to God. Christ exposes spurious authority like a splayed ox.

What is faith? Faith, as our friend, Mike Watson, likes to say, is a verb. It is to worship the Lord with all our strength, heart, mind and soul. It is to remember that our entire lives are to be given as a response to what God has already done, which is to choose us and to save us in Christ.

When Jeremiah asked on God's behalf, "Has a nation lost its gods," he called God's people to account for forgetting who they were, God's chosen people, chosen to serve God above every earthly institution. In our day, we are always at risk of practicing the same kind of amnesia.

In stark contrast, the author of the letter to the Hebrews reminded those beleaguered believers of God's constancy.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever"

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever"

Amen.