SERMON TAKE-HOME NOTES — July 6, 2025

I love this country and the great potential it stands for: A nation founded on the proposition that all people are created equal in our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness.

But we got off to a rocky start in living up to that proposition:
- We gave the freedom of the vote to only land-owning white men
- Native Americans were deemed savages
- African Americans were enslaved, deemed 3/5 a person
- Women were second class citizens to men

Over these past 249 years, we've made some progress towards rectifying these things:
- In 1861-65, we fought a bloody Civil War to free enslaved African Americans and to *begin* to give them rights (13th-15th Amendments)
- In 1920, we finally gave women the right to vote
- In 1924, Native Americans were given the right to vote, but with impediments in many states; the last of those barriers were finally removed in 1957
- In 1964-65 we removed the last barriers to rights for African-Americans
- In 1971, we lowered the age for voting from 21 to 18
- In 2015 we granted equal marriage rights to all genders and sexual orientations

But in recent years, we've seen cause for concern that we're taking steps *backwards* on the proposition that all people are created equal, to pursue their lives with equal opportunity:
- In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled in Citizens United v Federal Elections Commission that the government can't regulate different from individuals the independent political spending of organization such as corporations and Political Action Committees.
- In 2013, Shelby County v Holder struck down a main clause of the 1965 Voting Rights Bill, and there's been a whole slew of cases since then that whittle away the rights of many voters.
- In 2020 President Trump asked the Department of Justice to confiscate voting machines in states where he lost. (DoJ refused.)
- A year ago, July 2024, the Supreme Court in Trump v United States gave the President immunity for all "official acts," greatly expanding presidential powers — most legal scholars deeming those powers to now be well beyond what the framers of the Constitution intended, moving us toward a monarchy.
- In 2024-25 Trump won reelection on the Project 2025 agenda that is essentially a plan to move this country toward authoritarianism. (It is so clear in its goals that Trump distanced himself from Project 2025 during the campaign but then appointed many of its authors and supporters to his administration after the election.)
- This week Congress passed the Big Morally Repugnant Bill that represents the largest transfer of wealth from the poor and middle class to the rich in our nations history — including huge increases in spending to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.).

In the last twenty years we have been moving away from equality, with wealthy people getting more and more power. Plutocracy, rule by the rich; instead of democracy, rule by the people as equal citizens.

I ended the historical overview by mentioning I.C.E. — another cause for great concern. Two stories that have impacted me in the last two weeks are:

- On June 21, Narciso Barranco is a landscaper in Santa Ana, California, forcefully taken by I.C.E. agents, while weed-whacking in front of the IHOP in Santa Ana, CA. He has been living here for 30 years, undocumented, but is father of three sons, all of whom serve in the U.S. Marine Corps (one veteran, two active duty). The family has tried to go through the process of getting Barranco documented via having three military sons but can't afford it.

- On June 22, Donna Kashanian, age 64, — who has lived in the United States for 47 years, married a U.S. citizen, Russ Milne and raised their daughter, Kaitlynn — was gardening in the yard of her New Orleans home June 22 when I.C.E. officers handcuffed and took her away.

Question: how are these I.C.E. raids on productive U.S. residents different from the storm trooper raids on long-time Jewish residents in Nazi Germany of the late 1930's?

Your question for me: why rehearse all of this in a *sermon*? Answer: because sermons are about proclaiming the salvation God has for us in Jesus the Messiah, and I fervently believe that you and I are called at this crucial time in history to understand how that salvation can more our country forwards — forwards toward the proposition of everyone being created equal to pursue with equal opportunity full lives.

To do so we steer a path between the two extremes: The first extreme is to not see God's salvation as related to our lived histories in this country at all — that salvation is just about the afterlife. The opposite extreme is to too easily conflate God's salvation and with our politics, where we read Scripture as prooftexts for what we're doing.

What I've tried to do this past year-and-a-half is to carve a middle path that God in Jesus the Messiah has sent a brand new politics into the world, but that these politics are so different than our usual politics that they can never be completely identified with our politics. God's politics are there as ideals to strive for.

One of those ideals is expressed in our nation's ideal that all people are created equal. But another ideal, that of *freedom*, is more counterintuitive. It's expressed in today's Second Reading from Galatians 5. What makes for freedom, says Paul? Not self-indulgence, or self-serving. No, what makes for true freedom is, through love, becoming slaves to one another. It's all summed up in the commandment to love our neighbor's as ourselves. We find freedom through lovingly serving each other. Strange, right? Paradoxical, even.

This comes from Jesus himself in all four Gospels, namely, that he is our master and leader through serving us. And he directly contrasts his politics of service with our typical human politics. Beginning with Mark's Gospel, he places this teaching as the last one before Jesus enters Jerusalem to die on the cross. This politics of service is what the cross is all about. Here's what Jesus says:

> "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

Matthew places this teaching in the same place (Mt 20:25-25). Luke moves it even closer to the cross. He places these words at the Last Supper, on the night before his self-sacrifice (Lk 22:25-27). John follows Luke's lead by placing it at the Last Supper (John 13:13-17) and even adds the symbolic footwashing. Jesus washes his disciples feet as a way to act out his politics of serving. And John's extended account of the Last Supper adds another important dimension. Jesus tells his disciples that they are no longer just his students; they are his "friends" (John 15:15-17). Why is that so important? Because it points to the importance of *equality*. Friends have a side-by-side, equal relationship. And when you link equality with the importance of serving, Jesus is calling us, above all, to *mutual* service. It can't be true service if there's not equal relationships. Serving among *un*equals is servitude, not service. That's why our nation's founding principle of all people being created equal is so important. To find true freedom we need to serve one another as equals.

Our country needs us right now! Every chance we get, we need to speak up on behalf of true freedom and equality! Let's be part of God's saving work in the world! Amen