

“Jesus and Democracy” by Pat Conover



The third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 23, 2022

Last August I preached about the Deuteronomic revolution and the roles of prophets and priests in challenging authoritarian kings in favor of rule by Mosaic law preserved and interpreted by priests and prophets. The historical context for this sermon is the same, the return of Jews from Babylonian captivity, the battles to dominate local tribes that had taken over their previous lands, building the Second Temple and then the wall around Jerusalem. The hero in the August sermon was good King Josiah contrasted to bad king David.

The sources for the Nehemiah lectionary scripture for today comes a bit later in the same historical period, the return of Jews from Babylon. Ezra is the hero in this lectionary scripture, a prophet/priest who arose from the common people, not from a priestly line.

The stories in Ezra and Nehemiah were written down in the 4th century bce, a time when Jews were spreading around the Mediterranean and working out Judaism that was **not** focused on stories of a covenant of divine right to a promised homeland.

Ezra's big contribution was running a week long spiritual retreat for all the Jews in Jerusalem. He read the Torah to the people and had a lot of helpers to gather the people in groups to discuss the Torah, what it was and why it mattered. Understanding the guidance of scripture for shaping life together is very different from supporting priests and a temple tradition in which the people offer animal sacrifices so that God would keep a promise to give the Jews Judah and Israel as a God protected homeland.

Ezra's contribution laid the groundwork for a Judaism focused on rabbis and synagogues even though it is a story focused on Jerusalem. Ezra's guidance that Jews should study Torah as guidance for economic and social relationships is a challenge not only to authoritarian kings but also to then Jewish priests and now Catholic and Protestant clergy who claim the authorized authority to interpret scripture and require assent of laity.

One contemporary example is that Orthodox Jews in contemporary Israel carved out an exemption for their young men from obligatory military service so that they can study Torah. Another is some Catholic priests who would deny communion to President Biden because he does not accept their guidance on

abortion policy. Another is U. S. fundamentalists who support Jews versus Palestinians in Israel because they imagine it would bring on apocalyptic end times.

Should Israel be a nation dominated by a theocracy of Orthodox Jews? Should the United States be a nation dominated by a theocracy of 19th Century oriented fundamentalist Christians with Donald Trump as king? Should the United States be a nation dominated by contemporary progressive Christians? I'm too old to be a good king.

It is one thing to challenge the divine right of kings and reject authoritarian rule, and another to agree on the roles of religious faith in contributing to the shaping of democracies. Does your Christian faith influence how you vote and act politically?

Under the empire of Cyrus of Persia, and then under the more oppressive Roman Empire, Israel and Judah were occupied territories being exploited for the benefits of empires, but also largely self-governing for many common purposes. In the time of Jesus the temple priests and a few wealthy families in Jerusalem were conduits for Rome's exploitation and impoverishment of the Jews spread across Judah and Israel. In contrast, synagogues in Jerusalem and spread around Israel and Judah, spreading around the Mediterranean, provided some self-governance for Jews. Rabbis, including Jesus, contributed to understanding and applying Jewish Torah and traditions as guidance for such limited self-governance.

Jesus, as a trained rabbi reflecting the tradition of Hillel, did what rabbis did. When he returned from being baptized and taking time for his inner journey in the wilderness, he spoke and interpreted Torah and other scriptures in Galilean synagogues and gained some local fame. His interpretations of scripture challenged the rabbis in the tradition of Shammai, and people Luke called Pharisees. In the time of Jesus there were a half dozen or so Jewish religions including: temple

priests in Jerusalem, Samaritans who read Torah in Hebrew rather than in Greek or Aramaic and offered animal sacrifices locally in hill shrines such as Bethel, Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Baptists, Alexandrian Greek oriented mystics who wrote the Gospel of Thomas, and Zealot military rebels wanting to fight Rome and reestablish the Maccabean tradition.

One can look at the political circumstances of Jesus as small scale local democracy with synagogues acting as a sort of Congress in which people discussed issues of the day. Synagogues had a Judgment seat with the seated judge making public decisions. A little further on in Luke past the lectionary scripture, a man asked Jesus to tell his brother to divide the family inheritance with him. Jesus responded, "Who set me up to be a judge or arbiter over you?" Then Jesus went on to tell a parable which invites us to think and feel through our own guidance questions.

I see Seekers as a synagogue-like democracy. Most of us contribute at least something to our common budget. We currently need more participants to step up or increase their giving to support our synagogue-like purposes: supporting members and other individuals in need, supporting domestic and international organizations that we know directly through participation and jointly affirm, supporting our ministry of place by offering use of our building for groups that share our values, and supporting coalitions with a diversity of partners for several shared purposes.

Stewards, the Servant Leadership Team, several mission groups, two all-Seekers committees, our Seekers Treasurer, and the Financial Oversight Group, all have a hand in the open prioritizing, spending, and making transparent our budgeted resources. There are multiple guidance documents and many different eyes on the financial aspect of our shared lives in Seekers. I think of our practices as community scale democracy with access to decision making based on community engagement and participation in relevant groups and conversations.

In addition, there is a lot of off budget helping each other in practical ways and with anonymous or almost anonymous financial gifts and activities. I have recently benefited greatly by Seekers friends helping out with some shopping needs. I also benefited greatly from a nutrition conversation with a member of the community with professional expertise in that area.

The United States, so far, is a constitutional democracy rather than an autocracy. Some of our crucial institutions such as the free press have suffered greatly and yet, for those of us who want to find out the truth about important concerns, access to trustworthy information has never been greater.

There are a lot of political questions that could be picked up at this point in the sermon and considered with regard to biblical guidance. My sermons, and many other sermons in Seekers, have addressed a lot of political and economic issues. Our School of Christian Growth has lifted up diverse concerns over the years. John M. recently led us through some Greek philosophy that informed the writers of the U. S. Constitution.

Instead I turn now to the guidance of Jesus for supporting democracy as a form of government. Jesus did not speak directly to issues of democracy because national democracies had not yet been invented. But he said lots of things that are relevant.

To illustrate this point I turn first to the Jewish everyday prayer called the Shema: Deuteronomy 6, verses 4-9.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, our God alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." ... Recite these words to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

Jesus added a crucial phrase to the Shema, "*and love your neighbor as you love yourself.*"

A crucial biblical tension lurks here, the tension between the importance of covenant with *our God alone* and the importance of loving everyone, even the Roman soldier who oppresses you by ordering you to carry his pack for a mile. Carry his pack a second mile as a gift and an opportunity for conversation.

Our God versus your God is the justification, the story line, for war after war after war in Hebrew Scripture. It is the story of the Maccabees and the Zealots that led to armed rebellions against Rome. Rome responded by destroying the temple and destroying Jerusalem as a walled fortress. But notice, Rome did not turn to oppressing all the Jews in the diaspora, the great majority of Jewish people at that time. These diaspora Jews and Gentile converts were the people Peter and Paul sought when they spread the Good News about Jesus.

I turn once again to my favorite bible story almost certainly from Jesus, a story with so many great implications, the story of a Samaritan who helped a Jew. The Samaritans were a regional group of historic Israel committed to Torah. The priest who passed by the wounded travelers was part the corrupted temple establishment. The political implication of the story appeals to a tribal and regional coalition based on shared values, effectively an affirmation of Ezra's inclusive efforts based on shared faith and understanding referenced to the guidance of law and history.

Sadly, a lot of Christian history is war after war based on God with Us and not with you. We are the inheritors of the biblical promises, not you, is a major theme of the gospel authors, most dramatically Matthew. The gospel authors inserted one interpretation of scripture after another to argue that the promises of God in Hebrew Scriptures belonged to Christians and not to Jews who affirm Jesus as a prophet but not as the Messiah. The Jews have the better of that

argument because Jesus was not the warrior king messiah of the Maccabees and was not the apocalyptic messiah who took over control of the Earth with the warriors of the Heavenly Host. When the apocalypse didn't happen, most Christians backed off into the claim that their Christ, not your Christ, controlled access to Heaven after you die. War after war after war.

Peter Marty, in a recent article in *Christian Century*, presents the issues as follows.

American exceptionalism has trained us to believe that we're not just inherently different from other nations, we're intrinsically better. We've been taught that our national uniqueness is full of distinctive attributes, blessed by divine providence, that exist so the world will know what liberty looks like.

The origin of much of this thinking lies with the Puritans, whose expressed intent was to create a New England, a place that would be, in their eyes, exceptional. "We shall be as a city upon a hill," John Winthrop preached in 1630. "The eyes of all people are upon us." Winthrop was determined to persuade the settlers that they were capable of being a moral example to the world through their charity, their bonds of love, and their prioritization of justice and mercy.

The problem with such thinking lies in the word WE.

I have invested in Seekers, endured dissatisfactions with Seekers, and happily do what I can to improve and build up Seekers. One of the things that makes me happy and hopeful about Seekers is that we have a goodly share of critical thinkers who can help us see the limitations in the Shema, the limitations of the Gospel writers, the limitations of John Winthrop. I trust the open pulpit and School of Christian Growth will continue to transform us. I have retired from Stewards and gladly leave the pains of the next transformation to others.

At this point, Seekers is a small part of a small percent of progressive Christian voters in the United States. We are not much of a political or cultural threat to anyone. But remember, Jesus and his followers were minuscule as political and cultural threats. If we remain and become clear channels of the Presence of God in our time and place, we will have done our part.

Our secret progressive Christian covenant is that the WE who receive God's inspiration and guidance are everyone. We Seekers look to the historical inspiration and guidance of Jesus.

We Seekers look to experiences of Spirit in our inner journeys as right now inspiration and guidance. Jesus and Spirit guide us to love everyone including those we disagree with, including those who have hurt us and others who would hurt us.

Love doesn't mean we should overlook our fears and distrust of others. Love doesn't require us to be nice and polite all the time. Love doesn't require us to make excuses for bad behavior by others. Love doesn't require us to pretend that everything is all right. Sometimes all we can do with our love is say no.

Remembering to love ourselves as well as others guides us to be protective, resistive, sometimes even combative. Even when we are fighting with enemies who would hurt us we can live into judgment and grace that can transform relationships. That is inspiration for treating prisoners of war humanely. That was the inspiration for rebuilding German and Japan after the Second World War and have them as friends and allies today.

We can hope for and prepare for difficult conversations with Christian exceptionalists. We can talk with them about loving neighbors and ourselves. Jesus gave us that lens and language and it is as transformationally potent now as it was then. The Christian path of grief and hope, of anger and forgiveness, of

engagement and disappointment, is no easy path. Walking that path together gives us valued companions.

I value you so much.