

“Inflection Point”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – September 3, 2023

Please Read:

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

The definition of “inflection point” is simple: “a time of significant change in a situation; a turning point.” I think we’re at a serious inflection point in the history of our country, and the question is, what is a faithful response?

One of the great ironies of this past week is how the Virginia folk singer Oliver Anthony’s music video “Rich Men North of Richmond”¹ has been claimed by Marjorie Taylor Greene and other political right wingers as “the anthem of the forgotten Americans.” With equal irony, political left wingers attacked Mr. Anthony as a tool of the right. Mr. Anthony’s *cri de coeur*, (cry from the heart) in fact, was meant to blast ineffectual politicians on both the left and right...

Anthony, a contemporary “Arlo Guthrie” is protesting a reality increasingly emerging in our country. As poet Percy Shelley once said, *the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer*. Noah Smith observed that it probably has something to do with unfair tax rates. In a recent economics blog, “a Virginian (where Anthony lives) earning the median factory worker wage, pays a total tax rate of more than 24 percent, which is higher than (one estimate of) the rate paid by the 400 richest Americans.” Working class Americans are living in despair and are dying by the tens of thousands from drugs, alcohol, and suicide. By the way, suicides hit an all-time high last year. It’s what some pundits of our time are calling “a social great depression.” “We lose more Americans to deaths of despair every 10 days than the total of all the service members killed in two decades of war in Afghanistan and Iraq.” Whether it’s homelessness, loneliness, drug addiction, lack of skilled labor or suicide rates, these are symptoms of a serious crisis in American society.²

If you watched the Republican presidential candidates’ debate last week, Mr. Ramaswamy claimed that we live in a “dark moment... an internal sort of cold, cultural civil war.” As much as I disagreed with him on almost everything else, he said, I would agree we live in a moment of crisis in our nation, broader and more pervasive than perhaps we can begin to understand while going through it. Climate change, water aquifers, inflation... You know something’s off when the

¹ YouTube video referenced Thursday, August 31, 2023: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqSA-SY5Hro>

² Nicholas Kristof, “Liberals on Their High Horse About ‘Rich Men’” (*The New York Times*, Aug. 31, 2023), A19.

leading conservative party candidate increased support with the increase of felony charges against him. But it's more complicated than bashing political parties. According to a Pew Research study, 55 percent of Republicans view Democrats as "more immoral" than other Americans, while 47 percent of Democrats say the same about Republicans.³

I agree with both! We are losing our moral compass. People don't seem to care that we're in a crisis, or whether there even is a right or wrong anymore. The most common response to bad news is "whatever!" I was taken aback to read in last Sunday's NYT Opinion section a 2- page spread by Jamieson Webster entitled, "The Case Against Being A Good Person," with the subtitle, "The Virtues of Being Bad." It was the most vacuous writing I've seen in a long time. But it pretty much sums up where we are. *Being good is over-rated and being bad isn't so bad after all.* Whatever.

Not surprisingly, Nicholas Kristof, had an article last week entitled, "Americans are Losing Their Religious Faith." He notes that "for the first time in Gallop Polling, only a minority of adults in the United States belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque." Jim David and Michael Graham, authors of *The Great Dechurching*, write that "we are currently experiencing the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country... More people have left the church in the last 25 years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening (18th C.), Second Great Awakening (19th C.), and Billy Graham crusades (20th C.) combined."⁴

I'm not trying to say that going to church necessarily makes you a better person, but a connection can be made. In fact, the church has failed to be a light in the eroding moral landscape of our society, and not surprisingly, people are giving up on church. We in the church need to do some serious reflection on who we are and *how then shall we live* in these times? How do we give more faithful witness to the light that continues to shine in the darkness? I think it remains to be seen in our current crisis whether or not the church will be part of the solution, or part of the problem...

³ Pew Research Center, "Partisan Antipathy: More Intense, More Personal," October 10, 2019, [HTTPS://WWW.PEOPLE-PRESS.ORG/2019/10/10/PARTISAN-ANTIPATHY-MORE-INTENSE-MORE-PERSONAL/](https://www.people-press.org/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/).

⁴ Nicholask Kristof, "Americans Are Losing Their Religious Faith" (*The New York Times*, Aug. 24, 2023), A17.

Which brings us to our gospel text today. It is an inflection point in Matthew's telling of Jesus' public ministry. The confession of Peter to Jesus that "You are the Christ" is a turning point in the gospel. Peter gets the *words* right but *doesn't understand what he's saying*. From this point on, Jesus makes it clear that his Kingdom requires *self-giving* love, *self-sacrificial* love. His Empire is different from the Roman Empire. He's about the power of love, not the love of power, and if you are going to follow him, you must pick up your cross and walk the path of *other-centered* spirituality. Daniel Barrigan put it starkly, "If you're going to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood." Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Peter, taking up our natural protest to suffering, complains, "This must never happen," and goes from receiving the promise of Jesus, "Upon this rock I will build my church" to the rebuke by Jesus, "Get behind me, Satan!" Such contrast and misdirection is the life of faith for too many of us. We love the right words but have a much harder time putting the words into action.

Paul understands this, and our Romans text highlights the importance of active embodiment of Christ's love. Christ's moral code seems unreasonable at times, especially when it's not in line with contemporary trends. The temptation is to stick to vague aphorisms ("Love your enemies") but fail to take the time to listen and do the hard work toward better understanding, forgiving, and showing generosity to your enemies, or those we may never understand or agree with. Let's quit pretending and confess that we struggle with the core commands of Jesus! If not, we risk reducing the life of faith to toothless pleasantries only barely concealing hurt and dysfunction. We need to recognize that Christ-like love is not *a feeling*, but *an action*. Love is a choice that is sometimes really, really hard, sometimes lonely, and always costly.

But there is hope... This past Wednesday evening in downtown New Canaan a beacon of light shined in this "dark moment" of history for our country. The annual *Community Addiction Awareness Vigil* gathered our town together to hear moving testimonies of how young men and women struggling in the depths of despair found hope in recovery with the loving support of friends and families. It was a reminder to me that the way of the cross is the way to new life, wherever, whenever, and by whomever it is followed.

There were three common threads in all of the testimonies we heard. The first is that there came an inflection point, a point of crisis, and painful choices had to be made. Secondly, there was loving family and friends who supported the hard choices for life, to choose courageously another way... one day at a time, with acceptance and compassion. And finally, each of those people who struggled through addiction to sobriety and health are now giving back, they are helping others to find their way out of the darkness and into the light!

That sounds to me like the mission of the church. So, friends, I invite you to consider, “How does your faith inform how you respond to this present “time of significant change” in our country, a significant “turning point” in our history? As a congregation, how do we respond with bold action to the darker trends in our society? Amidst the very real negativity in the larger world, how can we as a community give hopeful witness to the light that shines in the darkness?”

Some of you may be experiencing an inflection point personally, a change that requires courage and faith. You are not alone. Can we pick up our crosses and work together toward the way of self-giving love and compassion? Can we not turn away, but empty ourselves and choose the path to new life, embracing the Jesus paradox that *those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake will find it?*

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.