

“FAITH IS PERSONAL BUT NEVER PRIVATE”

Rev. Victor Kim

Isaiah 65:17-25

(11-17-19)

Faith is personal, but never private. How do you react to that statement? Are you someone who thinks that your faith is between you and God and that no one else needs to know the details or are you someone who believes that faith has a social dimension that cannot be ignored? Maybe you’ve been watching the televised impeachment inquiry hearings from Washington D.C. this week. Fascinating stuff for an old political science major like me. Three full years after his election, I still have a hard time believing that Donald Trump is the President of the United States. I sometimes think that I will wake up and like Bobby Ewing in that infamous episode of Dallas; I will realize that it’s all been just a bad dream! But I know it’s not and I have to deal with it. But it’s pretty hard to know how to deal with a guy, who while being investigated for possible criminal behavior as president, including bribery, sends a Twitter attack against the former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine at the very moment she is testifying on live television in front of the impeachment inquiry. Remember, this is the President of the United States we’re talking about here!

This is also man who continues to claim a religious faith, a Christian faith. He recently appointed his so called “personal pastor,” a woman named Paula White, to the White House staff as special adviser to the Faith and Opportunity Initiative. While the initiative is supposed to give religious groups more of a voice in government programs devoted to issues like defending religious liberty and fighting poverty, it would seem that her appointment is more geared towards entrenching Trump’s support from the evangelical wing of the American church.

Earlier in his presidency, Pope Francis called into question Trump's Christian commitments. But Trump found two unlikely defenders in Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush, the same two people whom Trump had called "little Marco" and "low energy Jeb" while campaigning for the Republican nomination for president in 2016.

Jeb Bush spoke out saying; **I think his Christianity is between he and his Creator – I don't think we need to discuss that.**

Is it really?

Is faith just a personal matter between our Creator and us? Should our faith never impact the more public aspects of our lives? Jerry Falwell Jr. the president of Liberty University and big time Trump supporter said, **"Jesus never intended to give instructions to political leaders on how to run a country."**

So does that mean that whoever happens to be president doesn't have to take into consideration anything about his or her faith convictions when dealing with economic, environmental or military policies? Can political leaders, while professing to be Christian, **act as practical atheists?** When you're a politician, or anyone in the public sphere, **is your faith irrelevant?**

And we don't have to only pick on Donald Trump, what about our own politicians?

In the recent federal election, three of the four national party leaders, Justin Trudeau, Andrew Scheer and Elizabeth May professed a Christian faith background, Trudeau and Scheer as Roman Catholics and May as an Anglican. Jagmeet Singh is Sikh.

But most of the leaders, perhaps with the exception of Elizabeth May, kept their faith very private insisting that their personal faith would never dictate political policy. Now I accept that to a point and agree that a politician who desires to lead the country must lead all the people of the country and not favour people or policies whose religious

beliefs or positions are similar to his or her own. **But can we really say that faith is only about the relationship a person has with his or her creator?**

Can we really compartmentalize our thinking and acting so that what we believe about our faith is limited to an internal context and has no bearing on our thinking, speaking or acting in other parts of our lives?

It doesn't matter whether you're a politician, a plumber, a teacher or transit worker, it makes no difference whether you're a butcher, a baker or a candlestick maker, retired or just starting out in your career, if you're a person of faith, **you cannot keep that faith from impacting your thinking, your acting, your choices.**

Some of those choices are deeply personal, like the relationships we pursue or the way we spend our time or our money. **But many other aspects of our faith have deep and profound social ramifications.** Do we care about issues like poverty, racism, human trafficking, the environment? Does our faith have anything to say about the positions we ought to take on such issues? It depends on what we believe about what God is doing in the world. If we believe that God is not concerned about this world, about what happens here to this creation, to the people who are part of God's creation on this planet, **if we believe that our faith is only about our personal salvation, whether we will end up in heaven or not, then maybe our faith should just be kept private and to ourselves.**

But if we believe that this world matters to God, that all creation, including you and me and our neighbours and strangers, all matter to God, **then absolutely our faith has to impact our public engagement with issues that concern us all.**

Next week is the last Sunday of the church year, before we begin the season of Advent.

As we move toward the Reign of Christ Sunday next week, we need to acknowledge that as deep as we go in our personal relationship with God, even as we confess that our faith must rest on a personal knowledge and acceptance of Jesus as our Lord, **we must also go as wide in our engagement with the world.** The reign of Christ is not only confined to our minds or even our hearts. Christ's reign will be everywhere, in every part of creation, **it is tactile and physical as much as it is spiritual or psychological or emotional.**

That's what our text from the prophet Isaiah declares. Isaiah gives us a foretaste of this reign of Christ, of when Christ will reign as King. The reign of Christ isn't about a rescue from this place to a different place somewhere up there, **but it's a redemption and renewal, a transformation of this very place into something new.** And when God creates the new heavens and new earth Isaiah describes it in terms that aren't confined only to the personal realms of our hearts and minds, **but in language that evokes all our senses, with imagery that speaks to the very public nature of our faith.** This is God's dream, this is God's vision, this is God's will for creation and for us.

No more shall there be in the new creation an infant that lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime. Children and adults, the very young and the very old, all will know health and wholeness. So issues like healthcare, access to affordable medication, income security, **these are kingdom issues.** They shall build houses and inhabit them, they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit, says God's prophet. Housing is **a kingdom issue** and so is freedom from hunger, the ability to access nourishing and healthy food. The new creation of God is one in which hunger will not have a place, where everyone will be able to eat as they need. And it will be a

place of justice, where they shall not build and another inhabit, where they shall not plant and another eat.

Issues of fairness and justice around economics **are kingdom issues**. God's chosen will enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be blessed by the Lord. Fair wages and benefits for workers, laws around child labour or child poverty **are kingdom issues**. Kingdom issues include peace and peacemaking so that the world will become the new creation where the wolf and the lamb will feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox and none shall hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. Violence and warfare will have no place in the new kingdom of God.

These are kingdom issues and so they must be our issues as well. Because these issues matter to God, they must matter to us as well.¹ God could have given Isaiah a vision of the new creation as a place completely foreign to us, to our understanding, some place up there where we all become angels and sit around and play our harps, **but God gave Isaiah a vision of a renewed creation, a transformed earth with things that are familiar to us, familiar, but now in God's new creation, perfected.** The thing is though, that we don't just wait around until God does what God is going to do, the good news is that God invites us to be part of that renewal, to participate in what God is doing in transforming the world to his new vision. **Faith is personal, but it's never private.**

Faith is always lived out in the context of God's creation, with God's people, within the community of faith and through the community to the world God loves. We've spent

¹ Martin Thielen, "What Disciples Do." A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series Vol. 1

this fall exploring the theme of Deep with God, Wide with the World. Our faith begins with a deep and abiding personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Our faith is rooted in God's unconditional love for us, in God's amazing act of grace in becoming human and giving his life for us so that we might be saved from sin, from darkness and despair and from the finality of death. We need to know that personally, intimately. We can't have a faith that's only inherited; we must own it for ourselves. It can't be only in theory, just a good idea, it must be real for us, we have to believe it with all that we are. **But a personal faith is never a private faith.**

We can't live out our faith outside the context of community. I can't say that all that matters to me is my knowledge of God and my relationship with God. I can't say that because God doesn't say that. **Salvation in the Bible is always spoken of in the context of a people, never only an individual.** God saves God's people; God's renews God's creation.

The issues of our world are kingdom issues. We can't pretend that our faith doesn't impact our choices and actions in the public sphere. There are choices to be made and our faith will play a significant role in what those choices will be. In a world where political leaders will do almost anything to stay in power, where conflict and violence continue to rear its ugly head in too many places, where inequality, exploitation and oppression still exist in too many corners of our world, people of faith must work to be part of God's transformation of creation, we must go as wide with the world God loves as we would go deep with the God who loves us.

In a city where the poverty cut off is \$40,000 for a family of 4 or \$20,000 for a single person, there are 21.5% of Richmondites, our neighbours, who live under the poverty level. The poverty level in B.C. is the highest in Canada. 1 out of 8 British Columbians live under the poverty threshold and 1 in 5 children in our province live in poverty.

Every day 4 people die because of opioid related issues and many more suffer because of the enormous inequality of wealth in our city. The number of seniors that live under the poverty rate has almost doubled in the last 15 years and we have the highest rate of seniors living in poverty of any Canadian province. 9% of our seniors live in poverty. In Alberta is 3.4%; in Ontario is 6.4%, nationally its 6.6%. **These are kingdom issues.**

What will the people of God do about these issues? What will we do? Will we work publicly to find ways and support policies that move people out of poverty? Will we take a public stand around finding solutions to the problem of addictions and mental health, or do we think that it doesn't matter because they don't affect me?

And what about issues of racism? There are probably some or many here in this congregation who like Don Cherry and may even support him, but it's pretty clear that Cherry was giving voice to some deeply held frustrations about a rapidly changing country. If he truly wanted to just encourage everyone to wear poppies, he could have surely said just that. Instead he specifically called out a specific group of people, "you people," and pointed out that they were different and that it wasn't a good thing. I don't know if Don Cherry is a racist and it doesn't really matter to me, what matters is that his words encapsulated a feeling that too many others share, that the increasing diversity of our nation is something to be resisted or even feared. But then we hear the words of the prophet, that God will create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a

delight, that God will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in God's people. **God has a vision where all people are welcome, where none shall hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain.** Do we just stand back and say racism doesn't involve me, doesn't affect me, shouldn't be an issue of faith, or do we say that faith compels us to be involved around issues like racism, discrimination of any kind, hate speech and acts of violence and intimidation, bullying?

What is the church, what does it mean to be the people of God, what does it mean that our faith points us to a new creation that God invites us to participate in, **if not that we are to be publicly engaged in the living out of our personal faith?** There is no realm in our lives, no part of our lives where our faith is irrelevant. **We cannot compartmentalize our faith and function as practical atheists outside of our homes or our churches.** The kingdom that God is unfolding, the vision that God gives us will not allow us to live a life of private faith.

As we enter into a new church year, as we try to live out our vision and mission as a church, as God's people, I want to invite us to take our motto very seriously.

Deep with God, Wide with the World.

I want to invite us and us together as a congregation here at RPC, to become more and more a community that will go deep with God, deep in our worship, deep in our study of God's word, deep in our prayer life, deep in our fellowship with one another, deep in our spiritual disciplines, but also go very wide in our commitment to the ways of God's kingdom and the reign of Christ in the world. **I want to invite us to begin in this new church year, as the New Year unfolds, to become a congregation where every person will make a commitment to live out our faith in a public way, in some small or**

maybe large manner, as individuals or as groups of people and collectively as a church.

I will work with our Session in helping to provide the means by which we can publicly live out our faith so that the people of God, so that you and I, can make an impact on the renewal and restoration of the world God loves and God is recreating.

Scripture says that those who say they love God but hate their brothers and sisters are liars for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, **cannot love God whom they have not seen.** Jesus said, **by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. Faith is personal, but it's never private.**

Friends, may God continue to grow us in our deep and intimate relationship with him and also in the wideness of our love for one another.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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