

**Delivered July 14, 2024
La Mesa Presbyterian Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Biblical Text:
Mark 6:14-29**

Social Pressure & Conformity

As I struggled with today's lectionary passage, as found in Mark 6:14-29, I could not but keep turning again and again to the many concerns we have as we live through the current national election cycle and the current events of these days and yesterday's assassination attempt on the life of former President Donald J. Trump. What I realized was that today's Gospel lesson has much to teach us about the downside of conformity and social pressure.

I was struck by the Gospel passage that here we had a king, Herod, who ordered the beheading of John the Baptist. He did this despite the fact that, although he had John arrested, "[he] feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man [by whom] he was greatly puzzled, yet he liked to listen to [John]". *Mark 6:20*

So, why would a King who feared this holy man and to whom he liked to listen, order the beheading of John? It makes no sense, unless we recognize that amid his distress he felt a need to conform to the thinking and attitudes of those around him.

In the first instance, his wife, Herodias, the wife of his brother, held a grudge against John and wished him dead. In the second instance, his public oath in front of his guests, who most certainly were persons of power and influence, to Herodias' daughter that she could have even as much as half of his kingdom for having pleased him and his guests with her dance, made it, in his own mind, necessary for him to conform to the thinking of those around him.

Herod succumbed to social pressure, conforming to the social influence of his wife and guests, and thus behaved in a way that as Kendra Cherry, a Master of Science in Education wrote in her piece about Conformity, that conformity "might involve agreeing with or acting like the majority of people in a specific group, or it might involve behaving in a particular way in order to be perceived as 'normal' by the group. Essentially.....giving in to group pressure." *What is Conformity, June 22, 2024, Kendra Cherry, MEd.*

What is significant to me in this passage is that Herod acted contrary to the feelings of his heart and mind, for the sake of retaining his standing in the group. He allowed himself to be conformed to the group's pressure and the pressure of his wife.

So what does that have to do with the current concerns many of us may have surrounding the national election cycle and current events? I would submit that when we, as followers of Jesus, do not speak up or take actions, non-violently and respectfully, when we are surrounded by the rhetoric of many whose own actions are contrary to our Christian beliefs, then we fail to speak truth to power.

We must recognize that, as the report of the 209th (1997) General Assembly regarding the confessional nature of the church stated, as Christians “Reformed confessional tradition follows Calvin in emphasizing the authority of God over every area of human life: over personal and familial relationships, over the organization and government of the Christian community, and over social, economic, and political ‘secular’ communities as well.” *Confessional Nature of the Church Report to the 209th General Assembly, p xvii, paragraph 1.*

Now what the hell does that mean? It means, to my understanding, that as Christians we cannot and should not subsume the authority of God to any human relationships or any area of our lives, including those involving the state which is the political ‘secular’ communities within which we live.

That is, when we seek to identify our Christian beliefs as the beliefs or precepts of the state, then we are saying and acting as though God’s authority can be equated with the secular authority. And so, I believe, when we embrace the concept of Christian nationalism we are saying that our nation-state is and has the authority of God. But how can that be, if God has authority over every area of human life, including the state, not any form of Christianity nor the State, have power and authority over God and God’s creation.

That said, and as I thought about the world in which we find ourselves socially and politically, I gravitated to the Theological Declaration of Barmen, one of the Confessional Statements adopted by our General Assembly and included in the Book of Confessions, which is a part of our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Constitution.

Though the Theological Declaration of Barmen is a confessional statement that related to a particular historical time in world affairs, it, as all Confessions included in our Constitution, can also inform and guide us in living our lives as Christians, as followers of Jesus and as Presbyterians in today's world.

In the introduction to the Theological Declaration of Barmen, its historical background is set. I quote,

“The Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by a group of church leaders in Germany to help Christians withstand the challenges of the nazi party and of the so-called “German Christians”, a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler’s National Socialism”.

“In January 1933, after frustrating years in which no government in Germany was able to solve problems of economic depression and mass unemployment, Adolph Hitler was named chancellor. By playing on people’s fear of communism and Bolshevism, he was able to persuade the Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. As he consolidated his power, Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic process: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. He soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own “people’s courts,” initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews [and, I must add, LGBTQIA+ persons] and obtained the support of church leaders allied with or sympathetic to the German Christians”.

“Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.” *Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Confessions, page 246.*

Theodore A Gill, Jr, who covered the address by Arnold B. Come, president of San Francisco Theological Seminar, speaking at the mid-point of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, and upon the 50th Anniversary of the Theological Declaration of Barmen, at the 1984 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), stated that “Arnold B. Come.....identified three threats posed by the Nazi Government of Germany to Protestants who gathered in the Barmen Synod” in 1934. *T. Gill, 27 Feb 2009, The Theological Declaration of Barmen in the Presbyterian Church (USA): A process toward reception in the United States. The three threats of which Come spoke were:*

- “a. The supreme authority in their lives was no longer the free Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ but was found in dictates of the state’s leader;
- b. The Christian people of God had come to be identified with the national culture, with the ethnic majority and the historical destiny of that one nation...
- c. The Christian service of God was manipulated and made indiscernible from the unquestioning support of that state and its leader “

I continue the quote: “As a standard of faith, Come argued, the Barmen Declaration demanded that believers condemn the idolatry of one’s state, economic system, secular leader or political ideology, and that they reject the confusion caused by national claims to ultimate authority over citizens.”

Gill, stated in his 2009 article, that “Arnold Come portrayed Barmen as a counterweight to all in the surrounding culture that would enshrine American ideals as absolute” *Come, A. B. (1984) The Meaning of the Theological Declaration of Barmen for American Christians, Minutes of the 196th General Assembly*

In 1984 Come was already alerting us, as Christians and Presbyterians, to the direction in which our country was headed.

I believe that today, we find ourselves in a debate about the future of our country and the role of Christians in that future. I believe we are bound to debunk the idolatry of political ideology and secular leadership with which we are daily bombarded....democrat, republican or independent. Our role is to ensure that our concern should be for God and all of God’s people and in the course of local, state and national elections seek to discern how that concern can best be addressed.

That’s a whole lot to absorb and wrap one’s head around, isn’t it? But does much of what the Theological Declaration of Barmen states remind any of us of the similarities in today’s national and political discourse.

I believe it is a call for each of us to be aware of and to take action to prevent what happened in Nazi Germany from happening in the United States of America.

That is a lot to shoulder and take upon ourselves, but it is also something that begins in our individual lives and bubbles up through our household, our community and beyond. Yet, it is action that must be taken, respectfully and non-violently. I know that I am overwhelmed by how even I can work to change the direction of the national discourse. Yet I also know that I can do it, one on one, in relationship with others, as a starting place.

Thus, If we hear or know of untruths being stated by family and friends, we need to call it out. The days of “oh we don’t discuss religion or politics at the family table in order to keep the peace” may be, NO, should be over.

And I confess that I have taken the stance of let’s just “keep the peace.” I have a friend, a very dear friend, who recently shared that a certain President was a pedophile and she could not support a pedophile. I remained silent and moved the conversation along. I was going along to get along, I was conforming to the moment, I was allowing social pressure and conformity to stifle what I believed was an untruth. I should have asked, “How do you know this to be true? Help me understand how you have come to that conclusion.” Instead, I let it pass and through my silence, I actually validated her statement.

Siblings in Christ, we must speak truth to power, we must bear witness to the truth of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we must stand up for the marginalized and those oppressed and made scapegoats for all the ills of society. Let us then resolve to do so, a step at a time, a relationship at a time.

Let us, therefore, no longer bow to social pressure or to seek to be conformed. It may not be easy, it may even create schism and broken relationships, but for the sake of the Word of God, we must bear witness to the Good News of the Gospel that in life and in death we belong to God, that God is the only and ultimate authority over our lives.....personal, familial, social and political and that to God, and to God alone, through Christ Jesus, do we owe our very being and allegiance.

Thanks be to God.