

Gerrymandering Our Faith

Luke 4:16-30

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 31) 2025

Kyle Childress

Jesus is the center of our faith. Community is the center of our life. Reconciliation is the center of our work.

-John Garland, San Antonio Mennonite Church

Gerrymandering has been at the center of the news lately. At the behest Donald Trump, over the past several weeks Gov. Abbott and Texas legislature leaders decided to redistrict the Texas congressional map at mid-decade instead of at the end of the decade. The standard is for redistricting to be done after a new census has been completed every ten years, giving us up-to-date population and demographic information, with the hope that congressional maps can more accurately represent the voters.

Redistricting is a legitimate and required task if we are to have members of congress more truly represent their constituents. Gerrymandering is taking that practice and skewing it, misusing it, to give lawmakers of their party more representation than what the votes suggest they should receive.

Gerrymandering is an old American political practice, coined in 1812 when Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry signed a redistricting bill that created a strangely shaped, salamander-like electoral district to benefit his Democratic-Republican party. The Boston Gazette published a cartoon in response, dubbing the

bizarre district the “Gerry-mander,” a combination of Gerry’s name and “salamander.”

This latest round of gerrymandering started here in Texas after Trump urged Texas Republicans to help offset expected midterm losses next year that could give Democrats control of the U.S. House. Trump has urged other red states to redistrict, including Florida, Indiana, Missouri, and South Carolina. And then Democratic governors in California, Illinois, and New York quickly threatened to respond in kind with their own new gerrymandering.

The day before yesterday, (Aug. 29) Gov. Abbott signed the gerrymandering bill into law saying, “Texas is now more red in the United States Congress.” The new law is to take effect before the 2026 elections.

Both political parties have long gerrymandered districts, skewing district lines, misrepresenting social reality, grasping for disproportionate measures of power and influence, while diminishing the power of one person, one vote. But perhaps we’ve never had anyone so blatantly, coercively, using power to get power and hold on to power like Trump and his devotees.

This morning I want to talk about ways we Christians gerrymander our faith, ignoring or distorting parts of the Bible, misrepresenting what it means to be Christian, marginalizing, spiritualizing, domesticating, and explaining away Jesus, allowing us to seek coercive power and wealth, participate in and live with injustice, hurt others, justify violence, and live ungodly lives. Gerrymandering our faith allows us to live anyway we want while convincing ourselves we are Christian.

To help us, I invite us to hear once more one of the primary stories of our faith: the story of Jesus returning to Nazareth to preach in his hometown synagogue.

Jesus has been at nearby rival village Capernaum healing people. He returns home to Nazareth and goes to the synagogue like he always has done on the Sabbath. He stands to read the appointed Scripture for the day, a text from the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* (Let me make an aside: The year of the Lord's favor is the Jubilee proclaimed in Lev. 25, when once a generation all debts are canceled, all slaves are set free, and all land reverts back to the original owner. Jubilee was the redistribution of wealth and here is a quick example of how we gerrymander our faith by ignoring this.) Then Luke says Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the assistant, and sat down. Everyone waited for his commentary, which always comes after reading the text. They waited. It was the lectionary text for the day and everyone knew that someday, in heaven, all that Jesus had read would come true. In heaven or someday when the Messiah returned. But then Jesus said, *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

Everyone gasped. "Whoa! That's pretty bold of him! Who does he think he is, the Son of God or something?! He sounds like he thinks he's the Messiah!" Someone else piped up, "What's this about setting the prisoners free? We're going to need better locks on our doors and security systems with all these criminals running around. Everybody had better get a gun. And what about the poor people? They're just lazy. Good news for them is just more handouts!" One old codger said, "Joseph's boy has some growing up to do to see how the real-world works."

Then Jesus spoke some more. *Listen to me. No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.* The particular word Jesus uses here is interesting. The word we translate “hometown” is the word, “pratis,” from which we get words like patriotism, patriot, patriotic. “No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s patriotic home.” The best way to translate what Jesus is saying is to watch what happens.

He goes on with his sermon by referring to two of the great prophets of Israel: Elijah, and Elisha. The first, Elijah was sent by God to a poor widow in Zarephath in Sidon. Jesus says that even though there were many poor widows in Israel, God sent Elijah to this foreign woman. This is found in I Kings 17. Then he goes on with his sermon by talking about Elisha who, even though there were many lepers in Israel, God sent Elisha to Naaman the Syrian. This is found in II Kings 5. Even though both stories were in the Bible, their Bible and ours, when the people of his hometown heard this, they were filled with rage. They were not simply offended; they were not mad, and they didn’t grumble, gripe or fuss. No, they became so enraged that they rose up, drove him out of the synagogue and tried to lynch him by throwing him off of the cliff on the edge of town! Their own Jesus! Joseph’s boy! His own synagogue and his own hometown!

People, who profess to be the “people of the Book,” professing to be Bible-believing people, become enraged when he uses the very same Bible to challenge their patriotism. He challenges their “God and Country” with these Bible stories of God’s grace that extends beyond the boundaries of their country and beyond what they think their God is about, even though it is in the Bible. My heavens, you would have thought that Jesus suggested that God loves all people just like Americans, or that Jesus recommended that we receive undocumented workers from south of the border, and that God blesses other people besides Americans!

In 1950 in South Georgia, the Rehoboth Baptist Church, outside of Americus, decided that Clarence and Florence Jordan should be kicked out of the church because they had black people living and working and eating alongside white people on their farm that the Jordans called Koinonia, Greek for “fellowship.” A group of deacons came to see Clarence, who had a PhD in the Greek New Testament from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Clarence handed a Bible to one of the men and said that he and Florence would be glad to leave the church and apologize to the church for offending them, if any of the men could show in the Bible how any wrong had been committed. The man slammed the book down and said, “Don’t give me any of this Bible stuff!” Clarence softly said, “I’m not giving you any Bible stuff. I’m asking you to give it to me.” He then suggested to the deacon that if he could not accept the Bible as the “Holy, inspired Word of God,” then perhaps he should not only not be a deacon, but he should get out of the Baptist church himself. Well, the men left angrily.

What I’m suggesting this morning is that both the people of Rehoboth Baptist Church and the people of Nazareth Synagogue had gerrymandered their Bible and when Jesus came home to show them the parts they had left out or ignored, they were filled with rage because it threatened them, and challenged them to change.

Lest we get on our high horses about all this, let me point out that we all gerrymander the Bible and our faith one way or another. I’m often guilty of such practices, usually in the interest of saving time, but it is gerrymandering the Bible, all the same. Preachers and churches that don’t use the lectionary are particularly susceptible because they can more easily pick and choose which texts to preach, and over time, one can usually trace a preacher’s favorite scripture passages. The lectionary tries to protect against such arbitrary reading and preaching by

prescribing the texts to read each Sunday spread out over a three-year cycle, but the lectionary often gerrymanders in its own way by skipping over or ignoring especially difficult or complicated passages.

For example, the late and great biblical theologian, Walter Brueggemann, in a 2022 blog, talked about gerrymandering the Bible, and pointed out an experience he had in a church on All Saints Sunday where the reading was from Revelation 22:12-21, the last chapter of the entire Bible, full of words of hope. Brueggemann said, “This was a quite appropriate text for the Sunday with its articulation of the ultimate promise of the Gospel.” He went on, “In our hearing, however, we were allowed only verses 12-14, 16-17, and 20-21, a sure sign of gerrymandering.”

So, Brueggemann went back and read the verses that had been skipped over. He wrote, “Of course, I was not terribly surprised by what I found. In verse 15 (skipped over!), there is a sharp contrast between the ‘blessed’ who are given access to ‘the tree of life’ and then there are the others who are characterized as ‘dogs, sorcerers, fornicators, murderers, and idolaters,’ all of those who live fake lives, and practice falsehood.”

Brueggemann points out that for churches like us, we tend to gerrymander the text in order to leave out the hard parts. As a result, we are left with an all-welcoming, all-embracing offer of the goodness of God without any exceptions or any noticeable ground for exclusion. Brueggemann asks us who is to say where free grace ends and cheap grace begins?

Brueggemann says there is only one solution to gerrymandering the Bible and our faith: it is the hard work of teaching and training. Of course, teaching and training takes time and effort and most of us do not have time for such matters. We

are well habituated to sound bites, quick summaries on social media, and all the rest – and I won't even get into AI (artificial intelligence).

To do the hard work of learning how to read and interpret the Scriptures means, in this particular case, to learn more of what the early church was facing as it sought to live out the gospel in the middle of the all-dominating Empire. Facing an autocratic emperor, who demanded fawning obedience or face harsh treatment, many Christians readily compromised. The Book of Revelation was written to urge Christians under threat not to compromise their faith, but to have the courage and tenacity essential to faith. Then we begin to realize that these hard parts of condemnation make more sense because some Christians were selling out.

John Garland, whom Jane has known since he was about eight years old, is the pastor of San Antonio Mennonite Church. Both John and his ministry I admire greatly. John teaches his congregation: “Jesus is the center of our faith. Community is the center of our life. Reconciliation is the center of our work” (see Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials*).

Although I haven't said this as concisely, I've sought to teach you these very things for all my thirty-six years here. Jesus is the center of our faith. Community is the center of our life. Reconciliation is the center of our work. And for thirty-six years I've tried to teach you, train you, and prepare you to have the courage and tenacity essential to the faith of following Jesus – following Jesus every day, day in/day out – practicing, practicing, practicing – until following Jesus is second nature. It is who we become together (there's the community part). The result is we will do the work of reconciliation and healing with God, with each other, and with creation (that's the reconciliation part).

But like Luke told us this morning, when we follow Jesus, we will oftentimes face hostility and blowback. Sometimes people might try to throw us off a cliff. Or nail us to a cross.

There is a quote often attributed to Sinclair Lewis that says, “When Fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross.” My own sense is that it is gerrymandered faith that is most susceptible to such fascism. A faith that justifies guns and flags and calls it patriotism. That justifies ruthlessness and greed and calls it capitalism. That readily criminalizes and deports immigrants while ignoring Jesus’ teaching about loving the stranger. That spiritualizes Jesus so much that he has nothing to do with how we live in the here and now. And a faith that bows to wannabe dictators and calls it God’s will, is a faith that has been gerrymandered beyond recognition. It is a faith compromised with the Empire just like in the book of Revelation.

I Peter 2:2 says, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.” I know, I know we need to be nourished with the milk of the gospel. But we are living in such days that what is required is a full diet of the truth of the gospel.

That’s why we’re here!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.