

5/25/25

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

——At night Andrew and I....After the 2 hour of wrestling little children, the 15th time of back tickling, and hugs and sips of water. Andrew and I usually watch one episode of a tv show before bed. Lately we’ve been watching The Rookie. If you aren’t familiar with the show it is about police. And the rookies are the new police recruits who are being trained and assimilated. I am positive there is a large gap between this show and what its like to be a police officer, just as much as Grey’s anatomy doesn’t really portray what it’s like to be a surgeon. But the constant way the characters - the police- walk into danger, and put their own life on the line for others, is amazing. There is nothing like right before bed wondering what would happen if someone hijacked the bus you were on at gun point, or going after a person who is trying to release a deadly virus into a crowded shopping center. Goodness... they way these characters are selfless. I grew up on these ideas and images of police as the superheroes. And I’m WELL AWARE the reality is entirely more complex and nuanced and mixed in with systemic racism and brutality. And I do think the highest values of police office are those who put their lives on the line for others. I think this about our military as well...I guess I need to watch some military shows next. Those who give their lives to protect our country, to protect our democracy, our freedom.

It’s Memorial Day weekend, the day when we honor our service men and women who’ve lost their lives for our country.

Have you ever given much thought to whether you'd be willing to put your life on the line for your country, for us, for democracy? And I know some of you have put your life on the line, have served in the military.

I grew up hearing things like, "they died for our freedom". Which is a kind of abstract hard thing to grasp. Freedom? What's freedom? They died protecting our freedom. As a kid I think I sort of envisioned they protected us from foreign invaders that wanted to put us in jail...or create a country like the Islamic state where women were controlled.

Over the past week as I was looking for inspiration for this weeks sermon, and I was thinking about Memorial Day and all that is happening in the world.

And I know—it's a civic holiday and not a religious holiday. And if I'm honest I cringe on days when the civic holidays of pomp and circumstance with red, white, and blue, and patriotic hymns fill churches. Well maybe I do more than cringe, I legit want to be as far away from that as possible.

Not because I don't want to honor those who've made the ultimate sacrifice. I absolutely do. But because I've seen too often the dangerous entanglement of civic identity *disguised* as Christian identity. The cross draped in a flag. Political ideologies parading as biblical truth. Power and superiority dressed up as patriotism and praised as righteousness.

And maybe like some of you, I'm against American flags in sanctuaries. And patriotic hymns in worship on Sundays like this.

It's not that churches shouldn't remember the fallen. But Memorial Day celebrations *at church* can become something else—something that borders on idolatry when we stop discerning which kingdom we're really worshiping.

This whole intersection of our identity as people of faith, and citizens of the United States of America is a complicated one. Our country was founded on the idea of the separation of church and state, AND let's be honest—that's never been clean. And some people assert that the country was built on Christian values and principles.

So I started digging into that question—what does it really mean when we say they died for freedom? That's when I came across... this fascinating article that Heather Cox Richardson brings up.

Beginning in 1943, the War Department published a series of pamphlets for U.S. Army personnel in the European theater of World War II. Titled Army Talks, the series was designed “to help [the personnel] become better-informed men and women and therefore better soldiers.”

On March 24, 1945, (not 2025, 1945) the topic for the week was “FASCISM!”¹

It begins by saying “You are away from home, separated from your families, no longer at a civilian job or at school and many of you are risking your very lives because of a thing called fascism.”²

¹ https://open.substack.com/pub/heathercoxrichardson/p/may-29-2023?r=2oefif&utm_medium=ios

² <https://archive.org/details/ArmyTalkOrientationFactSheet64-Fascism/mode/2up>

Fascism, the U.S. government document explained, is government by the few and for the few. The objective is seizure and control of the economic, political, social, and cultural life of the state. Why? The democratic way of life interferes with their methods and desires for: (1) conducting business; (2) living with their fellow-men; (3) having the final say in matters concerning others, as well as themselves. The basic principles of democracy stand in the way of their desires; hence — democracy must go! Anyone who is not a member of their inner gang has to do what he's told. They permit no civil liberties, no equality before the law. They make their own rules and change them when they choose.

——The Army *named fascism* as the enemy. Our troops fought not just against a nation—but against an ideology of hate, of authoritarianism, of racial purity, of propaganda disguised as truth.

A lot of people lost their lives for democracy. And a lot was lost in the people who weren't killed but the cost of war is always great.

John 15:12-15

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants[d] any longer, because the servant[e] does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

Jesus says, *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

And then he shows us what that love looks like: *“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”*

This has been used to sanctify war, but Jesus isn’t glorifying violence—he’s pointing to **self-giving love** as the path to God’s Kingdom.

‘He’s calling us into a different kind of courage. A love that lays down power instead of clinging to it. A love that looks like faithful resistance.’”

→ Jesus says: *No—you lay down your life in love. Not to dominate. But to liberate.*

Then there is a dismantling of hierarchy:

Jesus is saying: *You’re not blind followers—you’re beloved friends. Co-conspirators. Co-laborers in love.*

He reveals everything the Father has told him—there is **nothing hidden, no manipulation, no coercion.**

→ Fascism thrives on secrecy, lies, and blind allegiance.

→ Jesus invites friendship grounded in **trust, transparency, and shared purpose**

This leaves me wondering: what does it really mean to be both a citizen of this country and a follower of Jesus?

And maybe it's just me. I don't know if y'all are thinking about this stuff lately too. But this is why I'm talking about it today, because I can't separate what's happening in the world, with how we make sense of our faith and how we live our our faith.

So if Jesus calls us friends—not followers of empire, not pawns in a system of domination, but co-laborers in love—what does that mean for how we live as both Christians and Americans?

What does faithfulness look like *in this country, in this moment?*” People of faith have responded and tried to make sense of the complexity of being American and a Christian in very different ways.

One Response is

1. White Christian Nationalism: This is a movement that fuses a narrow vision of Christianity—usually white, Protestant, and patriarchal—with American identity. It believes the United States is a divinely chosen nation, and that it should be governed by “Christian values”

JD Vance articulated the “Christian concept that you love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then, after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world.”

Pope Leo took issue with Vance, stating: "JD Vance is wrong: Jesus doesn't ask us to rank our love for others.

This type of thinking has led to the christian values that we see that “exclude immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, people of other faiths, and Black and Brown communities.” Because the

people in power are all white and wealthy and they are first and foremost concerned with loving their families

White Christian Nationalism insists that to be a *true* American, you must also be a *certain kind* of Christian.

And let me be clear: it is not a fringe ideology. It is shaping policy, fueling violence, and distorting the Gospel in ways we *must* resist.

But this is one way that Christians think about how their political identity and christian identity intersect. It intersects into a political ideology that wants to create a government system that imposes THESE “Christian values” on everyone

2. Another common response to this intersection of our identity as Christians and US citizens is what we might call the “Keep Politics Out of Church” approach.

This is the belief that faith and politics should be kept entirely separate. That people come to church to hear about Jesus—not about racism, poverty, war, or voting rights. And that if we start naming real issues, we’ll upset people. Instead we try to be a church that straddles the line and keep everyone happy.

That has been every church I’ve been apart. The churches where I have to leave a part of me at the door.

And then, there’s another response. A different tradition entirely.

3. The Black Church Tradition.

Born from the brutal realities of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism, the Black Church has never had the luxury of separating faith from politics. From the hush harbors of enslaved Africans to the independent Black congregations formed in protest against discrimination in white churches (like the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816), it has always been more than a place of worship—it has been a *refuge, training ground, and launchpad for justice*.

Because to survive *was* political. To gather, to preach, to sing, to organize—these were acts of resistance.

- The Black Church has always interpreted scripture through the lens of the oppressed:
 - God liberates the Israelites from Egypt.
 - Jesus proclaims good news to the poor.
 - The Spirit anoints us to set the captives free.
- This theology says: *God is on the side of the oppressed—and we must be too.*
- **The Civil Rights Movement was led by clergy.**
 - Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer., Rev. C.T. Vivian.
 - Churches were *headquarters* for organizing marches, voter registration drives, and acts of nonviolent resistance.

- Worship wasn't escapism. It was *preparation for protest*. They risked arrest, violence, and death. And they sang spirituals while they did it.

The Black Church showed us that faith is not neutral. It must be *mobilized*.

This counters white Christian nationalism, which often presents a God of order, authority, and obedience to empire.

- The Black Church nurtures a *communal identity*—*we rise, we resist, we are beloved*.
- White churches often emphasize *personal faith and individual salvation*.

The Black Church has long known what many white churches are only beginning to realize: that the Gospel is not just about saving souls—it's about saving lives.

And while white Christian nationalism distorts the faith to preserve power, the Black Church has held up a mirror to empire and said: *Let my people go*.

If we are serious about resisting fascism today, then we need to learn from the Black Church.

Learn how to pray with our feet.

Learn how to sing justice into being.

Learn how to tell the truth with love and fire.

Because faithful resistance is not new. Our Black siblings have been living it for centuries.

The question is—*will we follow their lead?*

Now we also need pro-democracy movements, and political organizing in the civic sphere. We need people advocating for voting rights, for freedom of the press, for equal protection under the law.

But Christian resistance is something deeper.
We don't resist just to save democracy.
We resist because love demands it.
We resist not with fear or vengeance, but with a cross-shaped, resurrection-rooted hope.

And I would argue that to be a Christian that is completely devoid of any concern for the political...any concern for our shared life together and the systems that organize our communities then I think its devoid of the kind of LOVE Jesus embodied.

And as more and more people pervert the Gospel of love, and as Christians continue to be the leading face of this fascist government. It can be tempting to run the other way. To denounce everything that has to do with church. To get far away from conversations and stop thinking about the importance of our Christian faith in the political sphere.

BUT If white Christian nationalism is the face of fascism today, then the church—especially white churches—must be the *face of faithful resistance*.

When Jesus talks of laying down his life for his friends, he's not glorifying death. He's redefining *love*.

Love that *gives*.

Love that *sacrifices*.

Love that *chooses the good of another even when it costs you everything*.

And it's this love that threatens the very foundations of empire and white supremacy—because it doesn't fit into a system built on domination.

And I think it's the only love that is going to sustain a movement of resistance to empire without losing our soul. A movement that doesn't become the enemy oppose. Because it's core we - this community - gather weekly around a shared commitment to Jesus who defines greatness not through power or conquest, but through sacrificial love.

So church, may we be known not for our silence, but for our courage.
Not for clinging to power, but for laying it down.
Not for preserving comfort, but for walking the costly way of love.