



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“In Order to Form a More Perfect Union” Leviticus 25:8-55; Isaiah 5:1-8

On this weekend when we get to celebrate the birth of this nation, I want to hear from God concerning the values of a nation that honors Him. That would be “a more perfect union”—at least for Christians—wouldn’t it? So this morning we will confront God’s plan for the nation of Israel, and compare it with the way our nation works—certainly we’ll have to over-generalize on both sides, because of time—but I hope that we will find ourselves nudged in some new directions as we enter the summer and fall of campaigning for political offices at all levels of our government. We may be more prepared to help form “a more perfect union” because of what God is going to say to us today.

You’ll remember that Biblical history begins in Genesis 12: 1-3—the three most important verses in the Bible—with God making a covenant with Abraham. In Exodus, God rescues his people from oppression in Egypt. They had come to Egypt because of famine in their homeland, and found themselves on the bottom of the pile, mixed in with the other Hebrew slaves that formed the Pharaoh’s labor supply. Set free and fleeing Egypt, God’s people wandered in the desert for a generation because they would not trust God to provide them what they needed to take the land God had promised them. As part of that wilderness wandering, and to get them ready for their life in Canaan, God gave through Moses the Law—the 10 Commandments and all the other commandments and statutes that became the distinctive gift and identifier of God’s people, and still is to this day.

I said this law code was distinct, and that’s really important. Let me illustrate. The other nations (say, Babylonia) had law codes that kept in place a two-class system: the royal families and their wealthy friends, and then the other 99% of the population. For example, in the famous “Code of Hammurabi” that we all learned about in school, if an upper-class fellow stole a loaf of bread, he would pay a fine. If a lower-class man stole a loaf of bread, he would have his hand cut off. This was the accepted social structure of every nation—every nation except Israel. For since God had rescued them from slavery, where everyone had been on the bottom of the pile, the laws God gave abolished such class distinctions in a remarkable way, as we’re about to see.

So it’s time for me to quit talking, and for us to start listening to God through His Word in the book of Leviticus, chapter 25. Leviticus is the 3rd book of the Hebrew Old Testament. Find chapter 25. I’ll begin reading at verse 8, and read all the way to verse 55. (That’s too much to put on the screen, and that’s why I ask you to bring your Bible and mark in them so that you can see for yourselves what God is saying, and then have it to review as you sit with God in your daily listening lab you have with Him.) Listen now with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. [*text Lev. 25:8-55 NIV*]

Do you hear how class distinctions get abolished? People who fall behind are not left behind. People whose crops fail and who would lose their family land to a lender and become poor tenant farmers at the mercy of the labor market, these folks had some hope of redemption.

Their family need not be blotted out, or alienated from their land forever. They can redeem their land, or in the Year of Jubilee, it is to be returned to them. Likewise, people who have sold themselves into slavery in order to feed their family or to pay a debt are liberated in that Year of Jubilee. And these graces—that's how they would have been viewed in that time, as graces—were extended even to the foreigner living in the land; even the foreigner was not to be oppressed. These graces were unheard-of, clearly coming from the God who hears the cries of the oppressed, and acts to set them free. It was a more perfect union.

There are many other examples from the Law of Moses we could read, concerning specific parts of everyday life—loans without interest, for example, to prevent people getting behind. Or, returning each night the outerwear robe that a poor man put up as collateral on a loan, so that man would not freeze. Small things and large things God commanded through Moses, so that there would not be a stratification of society.

Now, the Christian leaders today who pound their Bibles demanding that the United States be returned to its roots as a Christian nation—why is it that we never hear about these applications of God's values? When the Bible talks about "justice", it means far more than an individual getting fair treatment, say, in a court of law. Biblical justice also requires that people have the basics they need in order to live and support their families. Why don't we hear the "tall steeple people" and "megachurch and media ministers" talk about that?

The Bible is a remarkable window on both the standards of God—but also the checkered record of the nation's obedience to those standards. I have one more passage to read with you this morning, and it's from the Prophet Isaiah, in what we call chapter 5 of the book that bears his name. Find chapter 5, and listen again for God's Word to us. [*Isaiah 5:1-8*]

We might have guessed, because these words came from a Prophet who was sent to keep the King on track with God's will, that we would find this to be a passage critical of the status quo. That's not always true, of course, but so often that is the case—and today's reading fits that pattern. It's the famous "Song of the Vineyard" that God gave Isaiah to speak to the people, to get their attention with this parable. As he concludes his word-picture, Isaiah begins to launch into a long set of woes, or curses-before-the-fact. And the first such attack is on people "who add house to house". Again, in this feudal society, that means that wealthy people are confiscating people's homes and throwing them out on the street, so they can acquire a little empire for themselves, and with it, the power that wealth can bring. This shows that often the Word of God about not oppressing your fellow Hebrew was ignored by those greedy for gain. The prophet was reminding people of God's judgment upon such practices, and the coming pain God would inflict because His people were abandoning the covenant their ancestors had agreed to, long before. Assyria and then Babylonia invaded the northern kingdom of Israel, and then the southern Kingdom of Judah, as God's instruments to do the same to these people who had been throwing people out of their homes. God did this, the prophets said, to bring His people back into covenant-faithfulness.

One of the chapters of our nation's history that made me feel really proud in the recent collection of TV programs produced about World War II, was the account of The Marshall Plan—one of America's finest hours. After World War I, despite President Wilson's pleading, the Allies in the Treaty of Versailles had ground their defeated enemies into the ground by extracting oppressive reparations. This set the stage for World War II. When the Italians, Germans and

Japanese surrendered to end that war, General George Marshall, with President Truman's and then Eisenhower's support, constructed instead a totally different post-war response. Instead of grinding these countries to dust, the Allies, especially the United States, would help rebuild the lives of these people who had joined in such evil. This sounds preposterous, compared to how the world had been working to that point. But in an incredible act of generosity, Europe and then Japan were put on a path to economic health. Yes, this was a boon to the Allies—there was now a huge market for our goods. But it gave people their lives back, and forged friendships that have continued to this day.

What a sterling example of Jesus' words: "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?⁴⁸ Be [complete, or] perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is [complete, or] perfect." (Matthew 5:44-48, NIV)

I hear so little about these values when Christian pastors or media personalities tell our government how to live as "a Christian nation". In a similar vein, more Christians and Jews have been sensing God directing them to urge their governments to forgive the debts of foreign nations, for this is also in line with God's values we have read today, lifting the oppression of debt.

I virtually never hear a call for Christians to band together to promote these Biblical values. In fact, in our country, it's almost seen as—what, unfair? arrogant? power hungry? sinful?—to band together to achieve any goal any more. Our national sense of community is rare—we had it on September 11, 2001, didn't we? But aside from a reaction to a tragedy, we look with suspicion at groups who act together to achieve a goal. We call them, "interest groups"—or "special interests", if we don't agree with their goals.

In the early years of our nation, about 1810, a French historian by the name of Alexis de Tocqueville visited America, and among his many observations was a clear admiration for the way U.S. citizens, of all classes, banded together into voluntary associations to achieve a goal in civic life. He had never seen this in Europe. But as Robert Bellah and his colleagues revisited the same places in our nation in the 1980's, this sense of "community" had largely disappeared.

A great example of this is the difference between how our nation handles medical insurance and how Germany does it. In Germany, everyone is covered by health insurance. It is not cheap, and it will soon get more expensive, since their population is aging faster than ours. But the outcomes of German medicine are better than in our country, and no one is left out (unless they opt out and pay their own way). They are satisfied with the well-off paying more, and those earning lower wages and pensioners paying less. The Germans call that, "solidarity", and their health system has been working fine, with regular tinkering, for more than 150 years. Their "solidarity" sounds a whole lot like the "community" we used to have across cities and states and our nation--until we seem to have turned into a nation of consumers.

Here in the U.S., we don't believe in doing this together. It ought to be a scandal that we spend far more for health insurance, and yet 40-some million of OUR people are not covered at all, and many who are "covered" are underinsured. A health crisis is the leading reason for

personal and family bankruptcies—and until the current housing crisis, the most-frequent cause for losing one's home. It is easy to see among our Gathering Inn guests here this summer, how many of them deal with health issues—mental and physical brokenness. Now that they are broken, their health care is part of what's clogging our emergency rooms across the country, and now it's paid for by our tax dollars. One of our homeless guests died two weeks ago overnight in his tent. I don't think he had reached age 40. No one knows why Eric died—there was no sign of violence. What about his health?

Now, it's not as though no one here cares. There have been attempts to create a better national health system. But all anyone needs to say is, "That sounds like socialism!" and everyone runs for cover.

What we forget is that even the heroes of American capitalism were not self-made men. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. How did he pay for his laboratory and his workers for all the months it took to produce the successful first model? He had investors. And when it came time to produce the invention in bulk, he got other investors. Thomas Edison was dependent upon others putting their money at risk so that he could have the resources to continue work after many failed attempts, month after month. Did anyone call that "socialism"? No, it was a solidarity of opportunity—or greed, if you prefer a negative word—that created a community of investors committed to, and cheering on, Edison and his crew. It was voluntary community. Not every investor participated at the same level. They got rewarded by how much they put at risk.

Aside from a community of greed and self interest, is there anything we can do in this country that requires all of us to participate, and the ones with more resources chip in more than the ones with fewer resources? Is it morally evil to practice "solidarity"? Show me from the Bible, please.

What has happened to us that we're willing to tolerate 40+ millions of our fellow citizens living impaired lives and dying earlier than they should, if we were all in this together?

If we're not all in this together, then we have nothing to celebrate on July 4th. Our nation's war for independence, our striving together to rebuild our economy after difficult times, our increased defense of our borders against terrorists—aren't these expressions of "solidarity"? Our tax structure used to show "solidarity". Why not health care solidarity?

A more perfect union—that's what the Framers of our Constitution and our Declaration of Independence were aiming for. But to follow God's values, we have to put God first, before our own self-interest. We have to want to please God more than creating our own pleasure or security or power base. Kinda like Jesus.

So, are you working to become "complete", or "mature" or "perfect", yourself (as Jesus commanded)? Are you sensing God's call to a closeness with Him, a loosening of your hold on your own self-interest, and a call to limit the self-interest of others? Do you trust God enough—that's always the question, isn't it?

As fall approaches, we will again find our media filled with campaign ads. Perhaps there will be debates, or town hall meetings, and there will be lots of people to analyze and comment

upon the candidates' stands on a variety of issues. I don't know about you, but during "campaign season" I find myself hiding from, or shutting out, most of the campaign activities.

I wonder if there's a better way. I wonder if we might seek candidates and support candidates and address candidates with requests that they listen for God's voice through Scripture, as well as through the many voices of the people they are competing to represent. Might we seek to influence, as well as be influenced by, those who are running for the privilege of compensated public service?

We need not suffer passively whatever leaders rise to office. We can have a hand in selecting from the alternatives presented to us, and continue to work with officials through their terms to seek to shape the agendas they pursue.

We will have more success if we band together to do these things in order to form a more perfect union.

INTRO for COMMUNION—another "together thing", not "a silo with God"

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on July 6, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]