Pat Conover: Beulah Land – For Whom?

Sermon for Seekers Church
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Pat Conover

Beulah Land: For Whom?

This sermon builds on my previous sermon where I pointed to Jesus as the center and meaning of history, at least that part of history that arose when humans were able to domesticate cereal grains and herd animals in the Fertile Crescent. This sermon also builds on the last sermon of David Lloyd that seems to me to be largely along the same path.

In this series of sermons, I am also aiming at providing a little balance to many Seekers sermons that attend to individual issues of calling and to deepened inner-life. Though I also value the connection to God through the direct presence of the Spirit in our personal and relational lives, these sermons are intentionally grounded in the other two persons of the trinity, the other two ways of knowing God. What can we learn from considering how we emerged as homo sapiens, as hunters and gatherers who turned a corner when evolution allowed us to use spoken language with each other? What changed when we invented written language?

As we began to create civilization, and not merely tribes, completely new orders of questions confronted us. There is more opportunity to be confused, more ways to get dirty, more dimensions to being worn out, stronger powers and principalities to contend with, and the joy of co-creating with God new ways to embrace the best dreams put before us.

My general theme is that Jesus is important for understanding the underlying themes of current cultural transformations, transformations that are rooted in a long unfolding human story in which Jesus played a central role. I am trying to recover the image of Jesus from that of a sentimental cult figure as well as from thinking of Jesus as a magical actor on some metaphysical stage outside of history. I am specifically going to be talking about the transition from tribalism to universalism as a way of understanding God's guidance in history.

First a little stage setting and then I will turn to the lectionary scriptures. The mythic history of Israel begins in Genesis 12 with the story of Abraham. This is a tribal story, one patriarch with his tribe moving as a nomad from one area to another. Such nomadic activity was, among other things, military activity. Competition for grass and water for herds required fighting and that meant that being in or out had a dramatic and immediate meaning. If you were a man, you were a warrior, and it mattered whom you fought for and where your allegiance laid. If you were a woman, your livelihood depended on your father or husband. I bring this up because the implied inherent right to fight for living space, with consequent death or displacement for the weak, was assumed without question in Hebrew scripture. This is the very same assumption white Europeans and others have made in conquering the Americas and colonizing elsewhere. It is a fundamental assumption of pure tribalism.

Such tribalism is alive and well in the world today. We see it in many of the non-Russian parts of the former Soviet Union, in the former Yugoslavia and in a lot of Africa. The United States played to such tribalism in the war in Vietnam and surrounding areas and we have the remnants in special immigration laws for the Hmong tribes. We dance with the definition of sovereignty in treaty relations between Native Americans and the rest of the United States.

Tribalism is often linked to religion, a huge issue in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. When religion is tied to tribalism, we usually have some version of justification of a special relationship with God. The Hebrew people called themselves a chosen people with a special right to the land in the nation of Israel. The oppressive power of such claiming shows up painfully in the Middle East today, matched against other tribal religious claims. Such religious justifications turn tribalism into a confrontation of absolutes that leaves only winners and losers instead of compromise and transformation based on one or another universal principle.

What is the proper learning from tribal oppression? Is it to get up on top or to end oppression? Is it to get up on top and end all oppression on our terms, with our security and interests taken care of first?

A disciple in the tradition of Isaiah during the time when exiles from Babylon were filtering back to Judea and Jerusalem was being rebuilt wrote our lectionary scripture: Isaiah 62. It was a time when Jewish men were being called on to divorce their foreign wives in the name of reestablishing a "pure" Judean tribe, a purity that existed only in the imagination of leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, but nonetheless a powerful image whatever the grounding in factual history.

I will read the first verse again to recall the lectionary reading and then skip to the eighth and ninth verses.

> *For Zion’s sake, I shall not keep silent,*
> *for Jerusalem’s sake, I shall not be quiet,*
> *until her victory shines forth like the sunrise,*
> *her deliverance like a blazing torch.*
>
> *The Lord has sworn with raised right hand and mighty arm:*
> *Never again will I give your grain to feed your foes,*
> *never again let foreigners drink the vintage for which you have toiled;*

but those who harvest the grain will eat it and give praise to the Lord,
and those who gather the grapes will drink the wine
within my sacred courts.

Here is rousing patriotic tribal poetry. The recruiting sergeants are sitting at tables to the left. The Levites are ready to accept your contributions for the temple. The labor team to build the Eastern gate is accepting volunteers.

Do you think the blazing torch is for reading? Do you think the raised right arm, the mighty arm, is for sharing? [I raise my Bible and say:] "The United States is a Christian nation, the hope of the world. We have enough bibles and missiles and trade sanctions to prove it."

The imagery of Zion begins with Jerusalem, a mighty fortress set on a hill, protected by walls to keep out the foreigners. Paul answers such imagery 500 years later as found, among other places, in the 12th chapter of First Corinthians, another part of the lectionary reading. I read now the following 12th and 13th verses.

Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are make up one body; for in the one Spirit we were all brought into one body by baptism, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free; we were all given that one Spirit to drink.

It is not fair to contrast Hebrew scripture as tribal and the New Testament as universal. One of the most profound statements of theological universalism is attributed to Moses, the naming God as *I Am*. In contrast, many of the earliest followers of Jesus tried to hold the gospel in the earthen vessel of Jewish tribalism, complete with the marks of circumcision and the keeping of eating rituals. Nevertheless,

it is fair to look at biblical development of the bold claim of Moses and to see Jesus as a pivotal transformational figure, as celebrated in the prologue to the gospel of John.

> *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*

The first empires were run as if they were super tribes. Dynastic families, using religion and other tricks of empire to undergird military control, ran them. The stories of Daniel and Esther give us a window on such empires. Moreover, we need to remember in citing the story of Esther that it ends in a tribal bloodbath with the Jews as the killers rather than the killed. Daniel, in contrast, ends in an apocalyptic vision with a Gnostic secret. I read to you from Daniel 12:4.

> *But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and seal the book until the time of the end. Many will rush to and fro, trying to gain such knowledge.*

Neither of these wonderful stories, which help to bridge the distance between Hebrew scripture and the New Testament, hints of a gospel that changes history as we experience it in our daily lives. Instead, we must look to Jesus, who tells us that the Empire of God exists among us already, and the Empire is most easily recognized by the expendables and by the outcasts. Zion is turned on its head. Jesus walks into the fortress city of Jerusalem, walks into the largest building in the world, only one part of the temple complex, and turns over the tables of the moneychangers. The walls of the mighty turn out to be porous. Even the death penalty cannot put a stop to a gospel that settles for no earthen containers. Truth, courage and compassion find a way in the midst of all the obvious signs to the contrary.

To point to Jesus as the center and meaning of history is not to suggest that Jesus was the only or last revelation of truth

and meaning. Protestants who look only to the Bible for revelation deny the truth Jesus pointed to – that God is with us, always at work among us if we will only choose the humility and courage to become discerning of the living and shared truth we cohabit.

In the development of Christian theology between Jesus and our current age, many hundreds of years of attention have gone into trying to frame the Christian message in terms of two of the four families of philosophy derived from the Greeks and Romans, from the philosophies of Aristotle and of Plato. Both philosophies are universalistic and challenge tribalism but they do it in quite different ways. One supports the echoes of tribalism.

Aristotle was a phenomenologist. He was interested in seeing and relating observable facts, whether it was fossils of sea creatures found high in the mountains that laid the groundwork for geology, or the social patterns of the facts of families and slavery and empire. Today's children of Aristotle include the sociologists and anthropologists who seek to explain families, economies and societies by looking at patterns in data as tests of various social theories. For example, we get analyses of voting patterns to explain the last election. Instead of a Christian analysis of the issues and candidates, we get an analysis of how different blocks of Christians voted. How many Roman Catholics followed Catholic social teaching and voted for Gore or followed Catholic abortion teaching and voted for Bush?

Aristotelian social science is a powerful force in this society and it is inherently conservative because it starts from what *is* instead of *what is not but might be*. The best example of such thinking is Social Darwinism that has been used to justify slavery and patriarchy and is now being used to justify the ideology of an unrestrained capitalism that values profit above consumers, workers and the environment. Proponents of such unrestrained capitalism claim that

competition is a universally observed social pattern and that it leads to the dominance of the best people, the most fit as proved by the fact that they have control. The cry for justice is dismissed as whining by the losers.

Much of the current opposition to patriarchy and free markets is equally Aristotelian. The opponents just point to a different set of facts. In fact, a lot of the debate on Capitol Hill can be characterized as the debate of dueling studies as if there were an assumed value system of unrestrained capitalism in place. We won the battle for bilateral debt forgiveness for the most indebted nations in large part by pointing out the numerous violations of good banking practice in the making of those loans. Though we flew the biblical banner of Jubilee, we had to make the economic case that debt forgiveness could lead to the expansion of trade and a general strengthening of the world economy.

Plato was an ontologist. He believed in universal forms that were made manifest in the created world. Plato spoke of goodness, truth and beauty. He is more of a mathematician than a scientist starting from observation. The guiding philosophy of mathematics is esthetic simplicity around the concept of the number one.

In the context of platonic thought, it is easy to frame an image of Jesus as the manifestation of saving truth, as the revelation of eternal love, as the purpose of God the creator. That kind of language does not make sense to Aristotelians and it is a primary reason there is an unnecessary disconnect between scientists and Christian theologians in our time.

At the social level, Plato liked form and order. He liked simple marches rather than ornate musical creations. Roman law became distinctive because it was grounded, at least in principle, by the idea of justice. The naming of law as based on a universal understanding of justice, however troubled the application, allowed a convergence with a universalistic,

rather than tribal, understanding of Hebrew law. In later centuries, Christian theologians could call for support of a Roman empire based on the principle of justice for all.

However imperfect the application of justice for all was within the Roman Empire, two important and enduring social truths were born. The vision of justice for all creates the possibility of a rule of law that is more than a mere defense of the advantage of the privileged. This had an enormous appeal for joining together diverse tribal entities. Furthermore, it promised the possibility of self-correction as people wrestled with what justice really is, with what equality really means. Principled justice, joined to an Aristotelian derived conception of rules of evidence, laid the groundwork for the current legal system in the United States and for a world economy based on contracts. Principled justice joined to equality led to the concept of legislation rather than decree and to democracy.

The martyrdom of Jesus in Jerusalem and of Paul in Rome has weight in part because we think the death penalties were wrong, not merely oppressive but wrong. Jesus and Paul (a Roman citizen who claimed access to Roman justice) point the direction for two thousand years of unfolding reforms of governance under a rule of law. Such a long-term development contrasts with both English common law in which *precedent* is everything and with Cadi justice in which fairness is presumed to be found in the *character* of a judge as a person. A classic example of Cadi justice is found in the story of Solomon who threatened to cut a baby in half so that the claims of each appellant mother could be met. While individual character is important, the judicial system in the United States has many standards and procedures aimed at protecting against unjust and uninformed judges.

The second important social truth, which flows from the idea that the law should be based on the ideal of justice, is that minorities, even the despised, have rights. This is a very

basic part of the answer of the appeal of Jesus to respect, and not merely care for, those previously judged to be expendable. Many sermons dangle from this paragraph.

In short, a great many public policy issues in the time we inhabit are in part a clash between people who appeal to Platonic *principles* like equality and justice to reform *patterns* of behavior found in contracts or patterns of service. In my role as Legislative Director for the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, I repeatedly find myself arguing, in one way or another, that the way things are and the rules of the game are relevant but insufficient guides to good policy.

I am very aware of profound unfairness in our nation and the world but I am also aware of how precious it is to have the opportunity to make improvements by appealing to the ideals of justice and equality and their application in real world situations. Of course the practical question always remains, "Will there be enough Christians and other people of faith who will work and witness out of a commitment to the larger good to give the possibility of transcendence in the clashes of self-interest?"

Seekers is distinctive as an expression of Christianity in several important ways. One modest distinction is that we include a budget item for public policy advocacy so that we can collectively support systemic change. This budgetary commitment, which we recently raised from $5000 to $6000 a year, follows the individual calling of several members and stewards who are engaged in public policy witness and related activities.

I suggest that we recognize that one of our standards for public policy advocacy is support of justice for all and opposition to the idolatry of unquestioned corporate power and the elevation of profit to the status of a universal and absolute value. For example, let us judge each aspect of the

fruits and processes of capitalism-as-practiced by their contribution to the public good. Let the so-called invisible hand of progress become manifest.

Is the universalistic theme of freedom in the concept of free markets to be understood as supporting the unrestrained capacity of the strong to set the terms of labor and trade as means to exploit the weak? A Christian answer to the Aristotelians among us is that just because "everyone" does it that does not make a practice fair or desirable. A Christian answer to the Platonists who might think they are defending the universal value of freedom is to witness, as Paul did in the 13th Chapter of First Corinthians, that the greatest value is love.

I hope we can work not only for redressing specific injustices but also for a strengthening of the social and governmental fabric that has been woven from a meeting of Roman principle and Hebrew meaning, a meeting magnified by the teaching and life of Jesus my Christ.

We hold our treasure, including our prophetic work on public policy in earthen vessels. We need our containers even if they are imperfect ones. The trick is not to make our containers into idols. The temple bowl that turns up in an archeological dig is less important than the wine or blood it once held.

We do not need to be perfect. That is what confession is for. We cannot do it all. That is what intercession is for. But we can walk along together, healing our old wounds, strengthening our faint hearts, being a compassionate and not merely a just and fair people. That is what celebration is for. Jesus is not merely the center and meaning of history. He lures us forward to what is not, but what might be.