

Pat Conover: Christian Vision, Justice and the State

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Pat Conover

Scripture: [Mark 13: 1-8](#)

Christian Vision, Justice and the State

I am going to preach today about Christian vision, justice, and the United States of America.

[Pause.]

Before I say another word, I want you to take a moment to think about your first reaction to hearing my sermon topic. For some of you it might be a hook for some fruitful journal writing later.

[Long pause.]

The 13th chapter of Mark begins with Jesus and his disciples leaving the temple. The building in the temple complex where people gathered for sociability and business was, at that time, the world's largest building. "Look teacher," says the disciple, "What huge stones, what fine buildings." Jesus responds, "**This is all going to be torn down.**" It was torn down about 40 years later.

This story is best understood as Mark's effort to deal with the destruction of Jerusalem, and the genocide of the Jews and Christians, perhaps including many Christian and Jewish

zealots. To imagine the impact consider how you would feel if every public building in New York and Washington, DC was torn down and all the inhabitants killed. The destruction of the Jerusalem, especially of the temple, was a crushing blow to both the religious and political culture and in which disciples, and Mark grew up. The Jewish religion moved toward the synagogues and the Pharisees. Christianity became increasingly distinct and the Diaspora made it an increasingly gentile religion. James the brother of Jesus, Peter and the first home community of what was to become Christianity were dispersed. There was no more home community in Jerusalem for Paul's followers.

Mark moves on to present an apocalyptic view of the future. Modest in imagery compared to the Book of Revelation and the dozens of other apocalyptic writings of that time, Mark has Jesus saying the following to his closest disciples.

“Be on your guard and let no one mislead you. Many will come claiming my name, and saying, ‘I am he’; and they will mislead many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things are bound to happen: but the end is still to come. For nations will go to war against nations, kingdoms against kingdoms. There will be earthquakes in many places and there will be famines. These are the first birth pangs of the new age.”

This passage precedes a wonderful guide to Christian witness in the public arena. It includes, “Before the end, the gospel must be proclaimed to all nations.”

There are some juicy parallels in this passage to the attacks on the Trade building in New York and on the Pentagon. However, that feels too cute and too easy.

Most working days I go in and out of the fine buildings that are the working places of our government. I am not saying that what goes on in these fine buildings are what went on in the

temple or Rome. Nevertheless, this, too, is not the Realm of God that we have been waiting for. This is not a Christian nation, but it carries some of the possibilities and hope for which Christians, and others, have labored.

To get into our time and place for engaging the wisdom of God, as found in this story by Mark, I want to remind you of a few things that many of you already know and then string them together into a pattern you may not have noticed.

It wasn't until the 20th century when women got the right to vote, when the civil rights and voting rights act were passed, that there was a democratic nation, governed within a constitution that recognized the rights of minorities, that was elected by every citizen. However, change has come fast. Within our lifetimes, the majority of nations have come to be governed by a democracy of some kind, many with constitutions giving at least paper rights to minorities, and dozens with electorates as broad as found in the United States and with a multi-party system.

We are still at an early stage of civilization in terms of learning to govern ourselves, on a principled basis, with respect for all people. We are not merely a democracy. We are a constitutional democracy, the constitution restrains majority rule to respect certain principles, and the judiciary is a separate sector of government designed to protect these principles. Protecting principles boils down to protecting the weak from the strong by defending the concept that people have inalienable rights.

Our United States government is seriously flawed in several ways, ways about which I am both concerned and angry. Nevertheless, within my lifetime, and I am only 63, I have been part of three breathtaking transformations toward greater justice: the civil right movement, the radical expansion of the rights of women, and the revolution for people with disabilities. Furthermore, within Muriel's lifetime, we

created the Social Security system and repeatedly improved it; we created the Fair Labor Standards Act that got us the 40 hour week; we created Medicare and Medicaid, which hugely transformed the availability of medical care; we created the interstate highway system, and, more importantly, we upgraded the secondary road system that gets commerce and government to every corner of our nation. We also created a multifaceted welfare system that has greatly ameliorated poverty. That is not bad for one lifetime. I feel incredibly fortunate to have lived in the time and place I have lived. I love the United States of America, but I do not idolize it.

As some of you have come to realize from listening to my [earlier sermons](#), I am a dialectic theologian and I am delighted that so much of the liturgy of Seekers has dialectic sensitivity, like the one we used a few minutes ago. Dialectic theology, however, is first a balancing of apparently opposing truths. However, dialectic theology also has history and direction.

For me, as a dialectic theologian, history is all about the emergence of possibility, possibility that is hidden away in the smallest parts of our body, even the elements of oxygen and iron. Those of you who have read my book know how I have traced out that development to discuss transgender experience and expression. So you know, I am interested in an integrated reading of the sciences and of human history. For those of you remember my sermons about Jesus as the center and meaning of history, you will know that I think Jesus is important in the creating and unfolding of possibilities, including the possibilities we have as citizens of the United States.

Each generation has to decide what to do with its possibilities. Many do not even notice. That makes it even more critical that those with eyes to see should embrace the possibilities to make the world a lot better place.

Within the midst of possibilities, what lures shall we follow.

Our preaching and teaching and conversations can help us with this, but the answers are also to be found in getting involved and doing something. To embrace the possibilities of a constitutional democracy, possibilities that have been hard won, painfully purchased, one begins with registering and preparing to vote and voting. That is only a barest beginning.

I was deeply moved by Sandra's [sermon last week](#) on hunger. Both the passion and the teaching were great. It made me feel more at home in Seekers. Sandra's sermon led me to remember how thankful I am that I am a great way to respond to her call to justice, to compassion for those who are hungry, for those who have died and are dying of starvation as we sit here worshipping. I have the privilege to write and edit action alerts for the 7000 activists in the [Justice and Peace Action Network](#) of the United Church of Christ. I recently wrote on the issues of the Social Services Block Grant and on the raising of the minimum wage, both important means for reducing hunger in the United States. It makes me sad that only a few, or none, of you will see these alerts and will miss these opportunities to witness to your faith. However, if you did take such a step that would still be only a small beginning. Advocacy is about witnessing to elected officials. Politics is about choosing who those officials will be.

Politics is about working within the imperfections of mixed choices to direct our nation more surely towards ongoing transformation. It is about talking with people, going to meetings, taking on volunteer tasks, hosting a house meeting, and giving money. The more volunteer work done, the less your candidate will be dependent on money. The more you give money to candidates and work in campaigns the less our democratic system is distorted by the influence of big money, big money that is mostly focused on special interests rather than the common good. Politics is a place to witness to your faith. Politics is a place to give life to the principles you stand for. Politics is a good place to look for God's presence in

judgment and in grace.

You do not have to play dirty to be politically active. In fact, the more people who act cleanly, who tell the truth, who act for the common good, the better the electoral politics in America will become. It is not a dirty thing to try to direct the awesome power of the state to good ends. It is not a dirty thing to express your caring for the poor, the hungry, the sick, by making sure that our society uses its resources wisely to take care of such problems.

You do not have to try to impose your Christian faith on others to enter the world of politics as a Christian. In fact, because you are a Christian, you know you should work for religious tolerance.

I want to illustrate one area of concern that could justify some extra effort on your part in the political arena. Sandra talked beautifully about hunger and rightly named the problem of the distribution of available food as the point that needs systemic change.

I have had the privilege of participating in advocacy for anti-hunger programs for 17 years. I have worked on Food Stamps, the Women's and Infants' Feeding Program, school lunches and school breakfasts, the Summer Feeding Program, the emergency feeding program that supports Food Banks and Soup Kitchens, The Adult and Child Care Feeding program, the quality of the surplus commodities distributed to Indian reservations by the Department of Agriculture, and the Meals on Wheels program that is part of the Social Services Block Grant. I have also worked on international anti-hunger programs. I have also worked on dozens of other anti-poverty programs and low-income employment programs aimed at providing sufficient incomes to people so that they can feed themselves.

This year we have held the line on the anti-hunger programs. Fortunately, some of the anti-hunger programs have at least

nominal bipartisan support. However, if all our existing programs were operating with full funding, and if the artificial restrictions on eligibility were expanded, we would end hunger in the United States, totally end hunger in the United States. I am not talking about theory here. I am talking about existing programs that are mostly doing what they were created to do with reasonable efficiency.

We had a few modest goals in terms of fighting hunger this year, such as serving more of the legal immigrant population and reducing the burdens of paperwork in some programs. If we could redirect a tenth of military spending to anti-hunger programs we could totally end hunger. That is about \$40 billion dollars a year. For a twentieth of that figure, we could have gained our anti-hunger advocacy goals for this year.

At this point in the legislative year, I can say that I am thankful that we appear to have headed off cuts in anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs. We are still working for restoration of cuts to the Social Services Block Grant that have reduced the program from \$2.8 billion to \$1.7 billion a year. The truth is that majorities in the House and Senate, and the president, whatever the rhetoric about compassion, continuously resist improvements in the anti-hunger and anti-poverty programs. They are very skillful politicians. For example, they claimed the liberal agenda of expanding coverage through Medicare for prescription drugs. This legislation is currently in conference committee and the conservative leaders are pushing a proposal that would cap spending on the total Medicare program so that seniors, and people living with disabilities, would end up having less total money for their health care needs, instead of more. There are Republicans and Democrats who would vote to do this great damage and Republicans and Democrats who would vote to stop this damage.

To get back to the hunger agenda, you can help elect politicians who would be to expand the programs that can end

all hunger in the United States. How much does that matter to you? If you turn away, you are not turning away from dirty politics, but turning away from the poor about whom you claim to care.

You may disagree with my assessment of particular political leaders, or particular anti-hunger programs. That is fine. Join the conversation. Speak and listen. Learn and care. Correct my errors. I care too much about the people who receive government programs to want to hide my errors. I try to learn and grow all the time. I often learn the most from the people with whom I disagree. The dialectics of give and take, of rubbing apparently incompatible truths together, is not only the way to the ongoing transformation of our democracy, it embodies of God's love for those most in need.

Seekers Church should never become a political organization, or claim a particular ideology, party or candidate as its own. We should be especially careful about welcoming and encouraging those who have political ideas that are not in the majority among us. We can be careful and sensitive to divergent points of view **and** we can become far more politically active. We can make sure that our life together, including our outward ministry as citizens, reflects the best of the possibilities offered by a constitutional democracy, and we can keep on with our inward journeys so that the principles and programs we work for are ever more closely in harmony with the love of God.

We have a lot better options for witnessing than Jesus and Mark had. We are probably not going to be hauled into court for witnessing to our faith. Though I well remember when my phone was tapped back in Chicago because I was identified with the civil rights movement. Though I am well aware that standard peace activists, like those you will meet around this church, are being blocked from riding on airplanes because the Attorney General has decided they are terrorist threats. Easy or hard, the right thing to do is to let your faith find its

voice in the electoral process and in advocacy. Anything less denies our Savior who told us to care for the least among us, to take care of those most in need.

You probably already know the next helpful thing that you can do in the world of politics. Please do not forget it. Please do it. If this all seems to strange to you, talk with other Seekers. There are many among us who know what to do. It is all about recognizing, claiming and caring. When that happens, we will take steps out of the old world into the new world that Mark, and Jesus, longed for.