

December 5, 2017

To the Sanctuary Committee,

I first want to thank you for serving on the committee studying the very important question of whether Covenant should adopt a policy to provide sanctuary for non-US citizens who seek it. I recognize and appreciate how time-consuming the work is. Especially when policies are being studied that are potentially divisive and evoke strong reactions among the congregation, it is difficult work that must be done carefully, wisely, and with Christian love. It is work that requires the guidance of true elders in the church (note the lower-case “e”), and I am grateful to each of you for serving Christ’s church in this way.

Second, I want to preface my remarks by noting that I am not supplying them as a lawyer. I have been asked to provide my input on legal authorities and how those might be applied to Covenant should it choose to become a sanctuary, and the possible legal implications and risks, and I have provided those separately. What I write to you now, however, I write as a member of this congregation and a Presbyterian, and, more importantly, as someone who seeks to respond to my calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Regardless of my views as a lawyer who interprets, applies, and practices human-created laws, it is the thoughts conveyed in this communication that I ask you to consider as representing the path I believe Covenant should follow as we seek to follow the laws that God has given to us, and the teachings of Jesus Christ that we believe we must follow to bring our Creator’s kingdom into being.

I would like to begin the substance of my comments by framing the question of sanctuary as one that requires us not to use reason and logic as our guide, but instead to pursue genuine discernment of God’s call to us as disciples of Jesus Christ. My reading of scripture leads me to believe that is the only proper approach. Allow me to provide an example, and one that came to me recently as I was preparing a devotional on Mark 9:30-37. The passage in the NRSV is a familiar one:

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

Attempting to gain insight on the passage, I consulted with George Lamsa’s translation of the Bible from Aramaic (a resource suggested to me by Don McCall), and what I discovered was hugely insightful. Rather than asking his disciples what they were “**arguing** about on the way” as the NRSV reads, the Aramaic translation reads that Jesus asks his disciples what they were “**reasoning** among themselves on the road.” In both the NRSV and Aramaic translations, when the disciples tell Jesus that they were arguing as to which of them is the greatest, Jesus rebukes them. So how do I see the different words - “arguing” in the NRSV versus “reasoning” in the Aramaic translation — as providing insight into the question of sanctuary that Covenant faces?

My reading of the scripture as translated from the Aramaic is that Jesus rebukes the disciples because they were attempting to answer a question of human significance by “reasoning,” or what we might also call human thinking. Although Mark doesn’t report if or how the disciples actually answered the question they were “reasoning” about, for the point of Mark’s lesson, they don’t need to, as Jesus provides the answer. In fact, the point of the story that the disciples never actually did tell Jesus whether they answered the question over which they were arguing, or if they did, what that answer was, is critical, because the omission of that information indicates that in rebuking them, Jesus was not correcting their **answer** to the question, but their **approach** as to how to answer it. Significantly, when Jesus does provide them with the answer to the question over which they were arguing, it is one that does not invoke or rest on “reasoning,” or human thinking. Instead, Jesus provides the answer at which one would arrive by reference to God’s vision for a world of justice and peace; that one becomes the “greatest” (in God’s eyes) by putting oneself last, rather than first, and by becoming the servant of all. Jesus’ point is that the disciples are fundamentally wrong in their **approach** to the question; they approach it with their human way of thinking, or of “reasoning,” rather than to approach it by following what God has commanded us, which is borne of God’s omnipotence and omniscience. Unspoken but inherent in the lesson that Jesus teaches here is that if we use the wrong **approach** (i.e., if we use human reasoning to answer questions of faith), we will be unable to **answer** all together, and even if we can, we will get it wrong.

Another way to put Jesus’ rebuke of the disciples for their “reasoning” over the question of human significance is to say that the disciples have “sinned” in their approach to the question, in the sense that one meaning of the word “sin” is to “miss the mark.” As Jesus’ correction of their approach to the question shows, the disciples indeed show themselves in their “reasoning” to have “missed the mark” of the essential lessons that Jesus has been trying to teach them up to that point “on the way” (or “road”). And when one sins, one is in need of forgiveness, and repentance. (“And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’ John 8:11) One meaning of the word “repent” is to “go beyond the mind that you have”:

The roots of the Greek word for “repent” mean “to go beyond the mind that you have.” To repent is to embark upon a way that goes beyond the mind that you have.

(Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels really Teach about Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem* (HarperCollins ebooks 2009). pp. 24-25.) So, one way of understanding Jesus’ rebuke of the disciples for using human reasoning to seek an answer to the question of who is the greatest is not only that it misses the mark (“sin”), but also that to arrive at the correct answer to the question, the disciples must “repent” from their approach to answering the question. That is to say, the disciples must “go beyond the mind that they have” — they must go beyond their own human reasoning — and when they do, they will find an answer that is the startling opposite of the answer they would get by applying reason, or human thinking: the person who puts himself last and serves others is “the greatest.” This is the same observation that the apostle Paul makes in his letter to the Philippians. (“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:5)

This tells us that God is not interested in our answers to questions about issues of faith that we arrive at by applying our own human reasoning or human thinking. Those answers are irrelevant; they don’t even merit any mention because they are inherently wrong. They are fruit of a bad tree. (“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit.” Luke 6:43-35.) Jesus instructed us on this expressly when he asked: “What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit

themselves?” (Luke 9.25) Although the reference in this passage “to gain the world” might most obviously be seen as referring to material goods, meaning to gain wealth or something of material or financial value, I also read it metaphorically to mean to gain knowledge of human ways, or a triumph of human thinking, or “reasoning.” Jesus asks the question specifically to contrast what happens to us when we think and act in accordance with human values, employing human reasoning, rather than responding to the Spirit and God’s call, and acting in accordance with God’s values and commandments to us, and Jesus’ teaching and instruction.

One final relevant point of instruction that I take from scripture: God is not interested in having us ponder and respond to questions of faith by counting, creating tallies, or quantitative analysis, carefully weighing pros and cons and making decisions about such issues by counting up the marks on either side of a ledger. As we learn from the parable of the lost sheep, God cares just as much for the one sheep that is lost and then found as God does for the 99 that were never lost. (Luke Chapter 15.) Similarly, as we learn from the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, God doesn’t view our value by the number of hours we engage in God’s work. God simply does not seem to be interested in how we, in our reasoning, might weigh various factors that go into our decision-making, such as counting up the material benefits of one course of action over another. God either doesn’t count the way we do, or doesn’t count at all! I can only take away from this the lesson that God does not want us to make decisions based on such weighing; God wants us to make decisions by following Jesus’ admonitions in the beatitudes. Our God is not a God of sheep-counting!

Which brings me to the question at hand for this committee, and for our congregation: Our decision about sanctuary is no different. We cannot discern God’s will for our congregation by weighing the good that we might do by becoming a sanctuary against the potential financial and other penalties we might suffer as a result. I see that kind of thinking as being no different than human “reasoning” about who is the greatest; the weighing of whether to search for one lost sheep when doing so might mean losing others; or calculating how much to pay those who do God’s work by counting the hours they put in. Instead, we must discern God’s will by opening our minds to allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, and to follow Jesus’ admonitions to us to love God, to love our neighbors (broadly defined as all of humanity), and to do justice.

That is not to say that we should ignore the potential consequences of our decision and our actions under the systems that humans have put in place, such as the legal system and its potential penalties in the form of fines, forfeitures, and jail for violating our immigration and other criminal laws. Certainly, Jesus was fully aware of the inevitable consequences of his actions under the human domination systems of the Romans and religious authorities in his day. (“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Mark 8:31) But just because we are aware of the very real possibility - and perhaps even probability - of human punishment for violating human laws does not mean that we must, or should, be governed by our aversion or fear of those consequences. Again, we must turn our mind to divine things, and not to human things.

I want to close with a reference to a work that I have found to be particularly helpful, as I attempt to discern God’s call to me personally, and I hope that it will be helpful to you, too. In his inspiring and insightful work *If the Church Were Christian*, Quaker minister Philip Gulley addresses the Christian church as an institution in a chapter entitled, “If the Church Were Christian . . . Meeting Needs Would Be More Important Than Maintaining Institutions.” The concluding paragraph of that chapter, to me, summarizes well the decision that Covenant faces:

At the end of the day, it is important to remember that while the institutional church is important to us, Jesus appeared to give it little thought. Though the church eventually became the means by which the story and witness of Jesus spread, neither its genesis nor continuance seemed a priority to him. Time after time, meeting human needs took center stage in his life and ministry. Indeed, when Jesus did speak of institutional religion, he was often scathing, saying at one point that those who were religiously pure on the outside were inwardly deceitful and rapacious. This serves as a caution to those of us who've convinced ourselves that the goal of the church is institutional purity. **To be a follower of Jesus is to choose, at every ethical crossroads, to serve people above structures.**

(Philip Gulley, *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus*, p. 137 (HarperOne 2010) (emphasis added).)

I want to thank you again for your work on this committee. Among the greatest lessons that I have learned from our denomination is our polity, which so wonderfully lives out the apostle Paul's teaching that together, we are the body of Christ. I am profoundly grateful for the input and wisdom of every member of the body, knowing that decisions we make together, with input from all, will be the most faithful decisions for our church. I appreciate your consideration of these thoughts at which I have arrived through faithful and searching contemplation.

I wish you all grace and Christ's peace!

Doug Poland