

# A CULTURE OF CONTEMPT

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Plymouth Congregational Church  
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**Text: Luke 1:39-56**

Today's sermon, which reflects on some disturbing developments in our national culture, springs from several sources in addition to the scripture passage that we heard earlier. Start with this: I'm aware that while this is a generally well-to-do congregation, some of you know firsthand the difficult experiences of unemployment, of foreclosure, of deep economic uncertainty. I see the toll it takes on you. The fact is, some of our members are in the famous 1 percent and some in the 99 percent. But though our circumstances are different, we belong to one another; that belonging is the embrace of God. In a sermon like this, I want to remember that embrace, and I want you to remember it, as well. Second, when I look at what's happening in our country today, I am astonished and angry that Christianity is invoked so often by moneyed and ideologically-driven interests who pervert the teachings of Jesus in order to justify their own privilege and power. This is not the Christianity I know, and it is not the Christianity I would want the general public to know. Third, with those who are occupying Wall Street and other sites around the country, I am frightened and outraged by the concentration of wealth and political power in a very small segment of the population, a concentration that threatens to undermine our democracy. Justice Brandeis said, "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." And fourth, I feel today, as I do every Sunday, the burden of preaching with honesty, letting the radical demands of the Gospel speak for themselves without apology and without watering them down in order to shield our own vested interests and our own preconceptions from the searching eye of God. All of that is on my mind today.

That said, I am well aware that some of you may, with honesty of your own, take exception to parts of what I will say, and I want you to know that I welcome and respect your critique. In particular, I call your attention to next week's Adult Forum, to be held at 9 AM, in which Jim Swanson and I will discuss progressive Christianity, and I invite you to bring your questions from today's sermon into that venue.

In the meantime, will you pray with me?

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock, our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.*

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A friend of mine recently wrote: "Never before has the question, 'Who is my neighbor?' so haunted our national conversation as at this pivotal moment in our history. We are increasingly divided into

rich and poor, employed and unemployed, making it and not making it, empowered and disempowered, in ways that mock our democratic ideals and steal the bread of hope from our children." When I read those sentences, I found myself nodding vigorous assent, and I recognized, as I did so, that my heart was very heavy. When my friend said that the question "Who is my neighbor?" *haunts* our national conversation, he chose exactly the right word, because the concern for others that we once believed was central to American culture now feels like a ghost of itself, no longer driving the national agenda but merely hanging over it as a voiceless shade of something good that once was.

What has happened to us? Where is America's soul? The vigorous and robust communitarian ideals that brought us out of the Depression and saw us through the Second World War—ideals that placed the common good above narrow interests—those ideals now are shrinking to whispers that are routinely drowned out by the strident voice of an altogether different ethic, an ethic of hyper-individualism, libertarian self-involvement, ideological purity and anti-intellectual fervor. Let's put it more plainly: The selfishness of our lesser natures has taken over vast regions of the national soul; we are, quite literally, demon-possessed. We no longer seem so interested in caring for one another, in caring for neighbors, let alone strangers. The idea of shared sacrifice appears to be lost. The notion that much is required of those to whom much is given is portrayed as an attack on individual rights and liberties. Taxation, particularly progressive taxation, is equated with socialism. Assaults—subtle but real—are made on voting rights.

And here is the scandal that chills my blood and that makes this an appropriate subject for a sermon: This ethic of selfishness, this culture of contempt for the poor, contempt for the earth, contempt for science, contempt for the *Other*, is claimed by some to have its roots in the Christian religion, and many of its most vociferous apostles are self-proclaimed Christians themselves. But what Christianity is this? They talk about personal responsibility and self-reliance as though *these* were the core Christian values, which they aren't. Those values owe more to Horatio Alger than they do to the New Testament. Personal responsibility and self-reliance are fine values as far as they go, but the heart of Christianity is in another place. It has to do with community, with helping one another, with being in this together, not with the rugged individualist who goes it alone. And, by the way, the next time someone piously quotes to you the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," as a justification for gutting social programs, will you please remind that person that those words do not come from scripture. They were never spoken by Jesus of Nazareth; instead, they came from Benjamin Franklin.

What Christianity is this? These folk exalt and admire people who wield great power, extol the harsh and pitiless writings of Ayn Rand, celebrate society's "winners," and boast of what they call "muscular Christianity." But where are the words of the Sermon on the Mount? "Blessed are the meek," Jesus said. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." "The first shall be last, and the last first." "Power is made perfect in weakness," Paul said. What Christianity is this that we are hearing from in America? Most egregiously, it is used to justify and protect enormous concentrations of private wealth, often even claiming that wealth is a sign of God's favor and poverty a sign of God's disfavor. This is known as the "prosperity gospel." But do you remember what was said of the early Christian community? Listen:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

That the message of Christ could become so twisted, so foreign to itself as it has in this country is a testament to the ability of the human mind to rationalize almost anything. In the end, however, God will not be mocked. Selfishness that comes cloaked in religious finery will ultimately be exposed for the fraud it is. The flimsy garb of piety cannot disguise the grotesque shape of a perverted gospel. What must ultimately emerge—what *will* ultimately emerge—is the undisputable truth that the heart of the Christian gospel is compassion. The soul of the Christian religion is justice. The mode of Christian practice is community. And the ethic that rules the Christian life is love. I don't often quote Stephen Colbert from this pulpit—as a matter of fact, I never do—but a comment he made recently bears repeating. Speaking to those who make the spurious claim that ours is a Christian nation and who at the same time demonize government, rail against taxes and try to shred the social safety net, he said, "If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit that we just don't want to do it."

The message of Christ is not about personal responsibility and libertarian self-reliance. Drawing heavily on Torah and on the Hebrew prophets, Christ's message is about communal interdependence and care for one's neighbor. The message of Christ is not about dominating with power and worshipping success and posturing with noblesse oblige; it is about justice for the weak and the dignity of all persons. The message of Christ is not about private concentrations of wealth but about emptying oneself of possessions for the sake of one's own soul and the sake of the general welfare.

And yet, in this culture of contempt that has overtaken our nation, we hear comments like the following. (Mind you, this doesn't come from some oddball, some fringe-dwelling individual. This is from a leading candidate for the presidency who happens also to identify not only as an evangelical Christian but also as a licensed preacher in his home church.) Speaking to those who, in desperation, have begun to occupy Wall Street and other sites around the country, this candidate said, "Don't blame Wall Street. Don't blame the big banks. If you don't have a job and you're not rich, blame yourself." This heartlessness is what passes for Christianity today? It's a breathtaking statement at a time when unemployment is nearly 10 percent, as though one in ten of America's workers were just plain lazy, as though the banks had nothing to do with the recession, as though the pain of that recession had not been laid on the backs of the poor and the middle class while the wealthy simply saw their wealth grow. Frankly, I'm not much concerned with what you think about the candidate one way or another. You might even want to vote for him. But I am deeply concerned about what you—and the general public—think is authentic Christianity, and friends, *that isn't it*.

Right now, at this juncture in our country's history, nothing could be more important than that we turn away from the culture of contempt and reassert in our common life a culture of compassion and justice. And let there be no question in anyone's mind where the church stands and what Christianity has to say about all of this. Or if there is a question, then turn to one of the most seminal passages in the New Testament. Let these words describe the Christianity we would present to the world. It's called the Magnificat. In this passage from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, the pregnant Mary has just visited her cousin, Elizabeth, who praises her and her yet-to-be-born child. Mary is overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence, saturated with joy, probably feeling a share of fright—in other words, she is in a deeply spiritual state—and listen to what she says:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

Let us not allow the familiarity of the passage to dull the sharp edge of these words. Yes, it's a beautiful part of our Advent liturgies, and it has been set to glorious music. But neither the liturgy nor the music should be allowed to domesticate the words of Mary. This is as revolutionary a passage as there could be. It speaks of a great leveling. The powerful brought down, the lowly lifted. It speaks of a great reversal: the hungry filled with good things, the rich sent away empty. It is a singular dismantling of the culture of contempt. Whether it is good news or bad news for any of us depends, I suppose, on where you find yourself in the equation. But however you hear it, let us at least note that this is a different kind of Christianity from the kind that says to unemployed people: "If you don't have a job or if you aren't rich, blame yourself." It is a different kind of Christianity from the kind that repeats over and over, "God helps those who help themselves." It is a different kind of Christianity from the social Darwinist strain that is essentially based on the survival of the fittest. This truer form of Christianity has its roots in the great Hebrew idea of *Jubilee*, in which all debts are cancelled every 49 years. It is the original mandate for "redistribution of wealth." It isn't class warfare; it's class realignment.

The fact is, I can't solve this passage for us. I can't make it easy. I can't figure a way to make it say, "God is glad for us to keep our riches." It doesn't say that at all. I can't manipulate the words to assure us that our power will be left intact. It doesn't say that either. All I can do is offer it to you and ask whether you can live with it...and whether you can live without it. What might God be saying to you in these words? Do you dare sit with them for a day, or a week, or a month, or a lifetime, until the truth makes itself plain to you?

In the meantime, perhaps we should not be waiting for God to do what we should be doing ourselves. Leveling the community of human beings. Sharing the wealth more equitably. Letting go of that which we could never really own in the first place. And showing mercy to those for whom the world has not been merciful. And doing it all not in the name of charity, but in the name of justice, God's justice, which does not depend on our deserving but on God's unfathomable love. Let the culture of contempt sink back into the dark. Let the culture of compassion flourish. Let it begin here.

Thanks be to God. Amen.