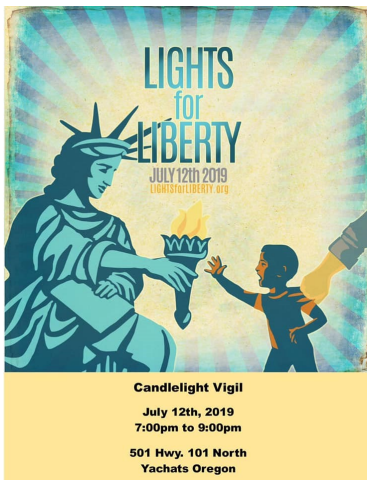


A Welcoming, Come-As-You-Are, Christ-Centered Community Church Agate Windows Newsletter JULY EXTRA!

And I will make thy windows of agates Isaiah 54:12

Lights for Liberty . . . Candlelight Vigil . . . Friday, July 12, 2019



On Friday, July 12, Pastor Bob organized a candlelight vigil to draw attention to the crisis at the border. It was part of a nationwide movement called "Lights for Liberty."

About 150 people participated in the vigil, coming from as far away as Lincoln City and Reedsport. Visitors vacationing from Ohio attended, and a family on vacation from Vashon Island delayed their return so they could be there.

When Pastor Bob was asked why he organized the vigil he said, "I feel an obligation to speak out. Not because doing so will necessarily change the world, but to prove to myself that the world hasn't changed me."



On Sunday, July 14, YCPC held a Refugee Sunday service. Pastor Bob's sermon begins at page 3.



How Are You Loving Your Neighbor?

I want to start this morning by prefacing my sermon with the words of a meme I read on Facebook just this morning. I think it will set the tone for this morning's remarks....

Preaching that we are to love our neighbor, welcome the stranger, and stand up for the marginalized does not mean you are making political statements. It means you are making Biblical statements.

So, as many of you know, or may not know, I organized a candlelight vigil Friday night to address the border crisis, as part of a national movement called *Lights for Liberty*.

It was, by all accounts, a success. We had about 150 people come out, and the tone was upbeat and positive. We sang, we held hands, we cried, we embraced, and more than a few new friendships made. For the most part, people passing by were supportive. Although there were a handful that shouted obscenities at us, showed us a particular finger, or pledged their love and allegiance for a certain President.

I went to bed with a warm feeling inside. I received at least a dozen Facebook messages from people in the community thanking me and this church for our justice work, for our welcome and our inclusivity, for our presence in the community. I talked to a couple vacationing from Ohio that follows the church on Facebook. They saw that there was going to be a vigil and said they just had to be there. Another family from Vashon Island also follows us, and when they heard about the vigil they delayed their return home to be there. Their daughter, a young person of color, actually addressed the crowd. She was well spoken and articulate, especially for having no prepared remarks. It gave me great hope for our future to see young people informed and engaged like that.

I tell you this not to brag, but to let you know that what we are doing makes a difference. People are noticing. People are being inspired by our witness.

By your witness...

I told you last week that I would be preaching about the border crisis. I wanted to give you all a heads up, because it's really the first purely political sermon I have preached in over a year.

I have to say, I fretted about it all week, worried that I would get the inevitable phone call or e-mail telling me that politics doesn't belong in the pulpit.

But then I received Brian Heron's blog in my e-mail, titled "Finding Your Political Voice." Many of you know Brian, as he was the interim pastor here before I was hired. Brian now serves as our Presbyter for Vision and Mission. I want to read an excerpt of Brian's blog for you...(Brian's blog follows in italics.)

The word political comes from the Greek root polis which is the word that points to the philosophy of how the city/state is organized, governed and ordered. It is the word that assumes such questions as "How ought we to relate to each other economically, socially and politically?" "What are the values and laws that guide and govern how we treat each other?" "What are the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship and belonging?"

I have titled this blog "Finding Our Political Voice" not because I want to see the presbytery and our churches suddenly insert themselves into our increasingly polarized political debates, and not because I want us to follow those in the religious community who have wedded themselves to one political party or another. No, I have titled this blog "Finding Our Political Voice" just as a reminder that religious questions and religious values almost always have political ramifications. Politics and religion have always been first cousins and it is impossible to completely separate them from each other.

We cannot proclaim from the pulpit that we have a Christian obligation to "welcome the stranger" and not also at the same time make a statement about what is happening to the "strangers" on our southern border.

We cannot teach that our religion calls for us to "love kindness" (Micah 6: 8) and at the same time not hear it as a word of judgment on those who use cruel and derisive comments to dehumanize others and manipulate them.

We cannot reinforce that our most essential ministries are to reach out "to the least of these" as we are told in Matthew 25, and at the same time have nothing to say about policies that discriminate against women, LGBTQIA persons, minorities, and the economically vulnerable.

Quite honestly, I could have titled this blog, "Finding Our Religious Voice" and made the same point. The world of religion and politics ask almost the exact same questions. The only difference is the narrative that we point to get our answers.

But make no mistake.

Religious statements have political implications by their very nature.

Jesus didn't say, "Love the person sitting next to you in the pew." He said, "Love your neighbor." And that is as much a political statement as a religious one.

These are my (Pastor Bob's) words now, but they reinforce what Brian has said, Jesus didn't call us to love the people that look like us, act like us, think like us, believe like us...

In fact, his call was quite the opposite. He called us to love those that are sometimes, oftentimes, hard to love. He called us to love the weak and the vulnerable, the outcast, the leper... He calls us to love our enemies, and in today's gospel reading he reminds us . . .

they are **all** our neighbors.

So, I'm asking you...

How are you doing with that loving your neighbor thing?

I'm asking you if your faith makes a difference with who you love and how you love them.

I'm asking if your faith informs who you are and how you see the world around you.

Is the way you act in the world any different because you are a follower of Jesus Christ?

I'm sure you must be as amazed as I am by the number of people who claim to follow Jesus, claim to be Christian, but you wouldn't know it by listening to them, by seeing their faith in action, by spending any time with them...

So I ask you again, does your faith inform your life, and how you conduct yourself in the world?

Let's take the conditions on our southern border for example...

We've seen the pictures of the detention facilities; we've heard the news reports...

Now I'll admit that some of the reports may be exaggerated, I'll admit that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a source of news that we can trust... but can we believe the pictures of kids in cages, sleeping on concrete with nothing but foil blankets?? Can we believe the images of overcrowding, where 900 people are being kept in cells designed for 100? Can we trust that people are dying of dehydration and medical neglect while in U.S. custody?

Can we believe survivors of the Holocaust and the Japanese Internments, who have started calling our detention centers concentration camps?

Can we believe Ben Ferencz, the last living prosecutor from Nuremberg, who has said that the U.S. is committing crimes against humanity?

Can we believe the Anne Frank Center for Mutual Respect, when they say there are alarming similarities between this administration and Hitler's Germany? Now I know that many people will say that to make such a comparison trivializes, or makes light of the atrocities of Nazi Germany; but the Anne Frank Center has said that "the comparison is just, and **not** to make the comparison, would be a dereliction of our duty to ensure "never again" to any people."

Can we believe the commission on human rights which recently said that conditions at the camps were "undignified and damaging" or the several U.N. Human Rights bodies who have found the detention centers constitute "cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, banned under international law?"

I might mention that the U.S. government withdrew from the Commission on Human Rights in June of last year.

Our own Department of Homeland Security, Inspector General, just released a report saying, "there is 'dangerous overcrowding' in the camps." He also cited a lack of "proper food, water, hygiene and laundry facilities."

Can we believe the reports of many detainees who report they haven't showered or laundered their clothes for weeks or even months?" A claim that journalists seem to back up, describing the stench that permeates the camps.

Now hear me when I say this...

Reasonable people can disagree on the causes of this problem. Reasonable people can disagree about the reasons behind why they are fleeing their homelands. Reasonable people can disagree about immigration policy, about border control, even about whether or not we should build a wall. Reasonable people can disagree about what needs to be done to fix the problem.

And we are to hold these people in mutual forbearance. Mutual forbearance is a bedrock tenet of Presbyterianism.

But we need to be careful.

We must not allow “mutual forbearance” to become an excuse to be silent or neutral in the face of injustice.

Most of us have our own ideas about what needs to be done...

- We need a more secure border...
- We need a less secure border...
- We need increased funding to house these people...
- We need to cut funding...
- We shouldn't have a border at all...
- We should build a wall..

So many solutions that it makes my head spin.

But . . . maybe we should leave those solutions to the politicians.

What I want to know is . . . are we USING our faith to direct our thoughts, our conversations, or our actions to make a difference in the lives of people who are suffering?

In the lives of our neighbors.

In the lives of people that don't act like us, look like us, think like us, believe like us...

One of the biggest criticisms of Christianity is that we are hypocritical.

That we have tamed Jesus, or created a savior that serves our own purposes and makes us comfortable, rather than challenges us...

That we have created Jesus in our own image, rather than allowing Jesus to transform us into his likeness.

Some people might accuse me of doing that this morning...

So, let's take a look at what our scriptures have to say, let's look at what our faith tradition has to say...

Deuteronomy 27:19

Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.

Seems pretty straightforward, but maybe that's being taken out of context, or maybe it's an anomaly...

And justice can have so many meanings...

So, let's look at some more...

Exodus 12:49

There shall be the same law for the native and for the alien who resides among you...

Exodus 22:21

You shall not wrong or oppress an alien...

Deuteronomy 10:18

God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the foreigners, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the foreigner...

Zechariah 7:10

Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Yeah, but that was the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. We live under a new law...

Okay, let's look at the New Testament.

Galatians 3:28

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for **all** of you are **one** in Christ Jesus.*

And, we've already heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan...

I'm going to stop there, but there are SO MANY MORE scriptures that say the same thing.

Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, the list goes on and on...

What becomes crystal clear, however, is this...

God wants the foreigner to be treated with love, respect, mercy; God wants the alien among us to be treated like a natural born citizen.

Now you may not like this, but then your beef ought not be with me. Take it up with God.

I'm literally just quoting scripture.

Now some might say, "Yeah, but you're still getting political. You're using the Bible to push an agenda."

I guess so, but so were most if not all of the authors that wrote our Bible.

And if we're not supposed to be talking about this, then why are there so many scriptures that talk about it??

Now I know that I said I was done quoting scripture, but here's one more that I think we all need to hear...

Matthew 25...

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Jesus is pretty clear.

Unless your faith defines who you are, and how you respond to the world, you will find yourself on the wrong side of Christianity. In fact, he calls those who do not love the least and the last of these "cursed."

Some of you may have seen the videos of CBP agents destroying water that's been left in the desert for refugees and migrants.

Jesus said that anyone who offers a cup of cold water to the least of these in his name shall not lose their reward... but our government is arresting people for providing water and other humanitarian aid.

Arresting people for following the commands of Jesus Christ.

Again, we need not agree on immigration policy, but can we agree that without water in the desert people will die?

U.S. law says that it is illegal to offer aid or assistance to migrants in this way... But I ask you, what would Jesus do?

I think Jesus would be standing in the desert with water and food for the journey... And, in the weird paradox that is our faith, Jesus is already at the border in the persons fleeing for their lives and seeking asylum.

As followers of Jesus, we have a moral imperative to use our faith to call out injustice—wherever and whenever we see it.

Scripture is clear. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves.
Scripture is clear. Love does no wrong to a neighbor;
And Jesus is clear; our neighbors include the most vulnerable among us...

So, wherever love is not present, we need to call it out!

We need to use our hands, our feet, our faith to care for those people God cares about. To provide safe space, welcome and hospitality for those that need it most...

And why should we do this?

Because we're followers of Jesus...

What else would we be doing??