

“UNMASKING”

Jeremiah 7:1-7; Psalm 123

Rev. Don Wilson

Before the last 18 months or so, the word “mask” was just an ordinary word. But since the “age of the pandemic” it has become a political ‘hot potato’, particularly if the word is associated with the mandating to wear masks. Sadly, in our deeply divided country this has become the subject of attacks, both verbal and physical upon such persons as store clerks, restaurant employees, and airline flight attendants.

BUT WITHIN THE RECENT WEEKS, WE ARE IN WHAT MIGHT BE TERMED ‘THE “GREAT UN-MASKING.” Thanks to the increasingly widespread vaccinations. But nonetheless a question lingers: Is it too risky to un-mask, particularly in view of the “Delta” variant? Some are understandably cautious. Time will tell how this all plays out.

This Morning I want to look at another kind of un-masking. I call your attention to a section of the “Brief Statement of Faith” — from our Presbyterian Book of Confessions.

"In a broken and fearful world

the Spirit gives us courage

to pray without ceasing

to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,

to unmask idolatries in church and Culture,

to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,

and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace."

— — A Brief Statement of Faith" {Lines 65-71}

These words assure us that God’s Spirit gives us COURAGE to do certain things.

And one of those is the courage **“to unmask idolatries of church and culture,”**

There is a certain “riskiness” to this unmasking, too. We risk HAVING TO COME FACE

TO FACE WITH THINGS THAT ARE UNCOMFORTABLE TO THINK ABOUT. To

address “unmasking] idolatries in church and culture Is an ambitious task So In the

brief time we have this morning, I want us to look at just a few things which might

seem to rise to the level of idolatries. But first, just a word about “idolatry”. There are

many references to idols and idolatry in the Bible. And certain images may come to

your mind; perhaps a golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai, which angered Moses to the

point that he “slammed down the stone tablets of the law” breaking them into pieces.

In the New Testament, the use of the term “idolatry” is largely figurative.

But this morning, I would suggest that one way to think of idols or idolatry is “putting your trust in something that is false, and which will ultimately disappoint or let you down.”

In our current culture, I suspect you have noticed, as I have, certain firmly held ideas embraced by some folks that appear to rise to the level of idolatry.

Some examples:

1. The right to keep and bear arms. Or “my second amendment rights”. To some people this is upheld as a priority as SACRED as anything holy! “If I want to own an automatic rifle with a magazine capacity of a massive amount of ammunition, it’s. y business. Don’t you dare to try and stop me!

2. Nationalism: Some folks confuse patriotism with Nationalism. Patriotism is a good and appropriate thing. I don’t know anyone who would doubt that. But when people literally worship their country—or their idea of what the country should be— it distorts patriotism and can become dangerous

3. The priority of “individual rights” over the common good. To some people “MY RIGHTS” take priority over all else. A clear example of this is the refusal” to wear masks or to receive vaccinations for Covid, putting at risk their family, close associates, and others as well.

4. Another, larger category is, what I would term, the “residual idolatries of the culture of slavery “in our nation...most particularly in the various forms that white racism manifests itself. White supremacy, being one example. We don’t have time this morning to deal extensively with this, but I want to recommend a couple of books that I have recently found greatly helpful. One is “**Caste**” by Isabel Wilkerson. The other is “**The Sum of Us**” by Heather McGhee. I imagine some of you have read them. McGhee’s book presents how the economic effects of racism have dis-advantaged white people just as they have dis-advantaged People of Color, and how all of us can be helped by effectively addressing it.

5. The idolatry of un-restricted capitalism. This is an issue that I want to address in the brief time we have this morning*. It is, I believe, of grave concern to our very democracy. You may be familiar with the work of Professor Nancy Maclean, an historian at Duke University. In her book, **Democracy in Chains**, she traces the history of a long-time effort by extreme right-wing political interests, to re-shape our government. I recommend the book. If you don’t have time to read it, I would strongly encourage that you google either the book title (Democracy in Chains) or the name of Nancy Maclean on Youtube, and listen to some of her lectures available there.

Over the past several years, Maclean has extensively researched the background of certain “Libertarian, Radical Right-wing agenda” promoted and heavily financed by the Koch Brothers for many years. David Koch died a couple ears ago, but Charles remains actively involved in a network of organizations and groups he has been instrumental in developing.

Maclean tells the story of how Charles Koch was influenced by the late James Buchanan was an economic scientist long affiliated with George Mason University.

In a lecture not long ago, Professor Maclean described how Buchanan influenced Koch and other multi-millionaires in constructing a strategy to stealthily effect dramatic changes aimed at stifling democracy. The primary goal being to severely limit any sort of government regulation so as to provide a virtually un-restricted capitalism to have free-reign. Professor Maclean has stated their agenda in these words: “WHILE WE HAVE A CONSTITUTION OF CHECKS AND BALANCES, THEY SEEK A CONSTITUTION OF “LOCKS AND BOLTS”. This is based on one of James Buchanan’s ideas that for capitalism to work, democracy must be ‘enchained’. (Hence the title of her book).

Koch and others have recognized that to be successful they have had to work at gaining power at the state level, which has been startlingly successful in achieving their purposes. Through gerrymandering and voter-suppression, they have gained control of state legislatures in 32 of our states. They have sought control of the federal judiciary, as we’ve witnessed particularly over the past five years or more. Case in point: The six to three majority in the current supreme court.

I WOULD SAY MOST ALARMING OF ALL is the fact that efforts are in play to call a constitutional convention for the purpose of amending our US Constitution. As provided in Article 5 of the Constitution, for the states to successfully convene such a convention, action is required by the legislatures of 34 of our 50 states. To date, according to Maclean, 28 states have signed on... meaning, of course, that only six additional state legislatures need to take action for this to occur. The amendment most emphasized seeks a balanced federal budget, which may sound appealing until you realize that this would likely pave the way for the end of social security, medicare, medicaid, and seriously

Page 4

curtail federal spending in other harmful ways. I would encourage you to google “Liberty Amendments” or “Common Cause” to learn more of amendments that have been proposed by various groups.

The greatest danger posed by a constitutional convention is that it could very likely “spin out of control” and become what some have called a “runaway convention” with potentially disastrous results for our democracy.

The most serious concern, simply stated If we allow our democratic republic to be in the control of the super-wealthy, we’ll likely end up with a republic but little to no democracy. A Supreme Court justice of another era, Louis Brandeis once said A country can have either a democracy or a concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, but it cannot have both.

Those words seem frighteningly relevant when one considers the efforts of those who seek to so radically cripple our democracy in their zeal for un-restricted capitalism at the expense of the common good. The same Justice Brandeis, cited a moment ago, is credited also with the statement “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants. .

THEREFORE, THE NEED FOR “UNMASKING.” To un-mask the idolatries of culture we need to recognize that in order for those masks to come off we first have to REMOVE THE BLINDERS. And to do that we need to pay attention to such wake-up calls as has been provided by Maclean.

Conclusion

My concern this morning is in the context of allowing our Christian faith to inform our citizenship. In the reading, earlier, from Jeremiah, we were reminded again of God’s consistent priorities, cited frequently by the 7th and 8th century prophets in the Old Testament:

*“TREAT EACH OTHER JUSTLY
STOP TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE IMMIGRANT, ORPHAN, OR WIDOW;
DON’T SHED BLOOD OF THE INNOCENT OR GO AFTER OTHER GODS TO
YOUR OWN RUIN.” {Jer. 7: 5-6}*

The phrase “immigrants, widows, and orphans” is biblical language for the marginalized and the vulnerable.

Looking again at the Brief Statement of Faith, quoted earlier, if we pick up on the lines that follow where we left off, we see that God’s Spirit gives us courage also **“to hear the voices of peoples long-silenced, and to work with others for**

Page 5

justice, freedom, and peace.”

do that will be increasingly difficult if we have allowed our democracy to become hostage to the rich and powerful few.

May we be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ in living as responsible citizens.
Amen.

*Much of the information that informs this portion of the sermon is drawn from the writings and lectures of Professor Nancy MacLean.
The book is MacLean Nancy, *Democracy In Chains, The Deep History of The Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America.*

*Lectures consulted for this sermon, both on Youtube.
May 17, 2019, Keynote address at the annual dinner of “Fix Democracy First”*

February 8, 2021: Interview with Ellen Hunter .