Galatians 3:26-28 – for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.

Mark 8:34-35 - He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Jeremiah 22:13-19 English Standard Version (ESV)

13“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,  
    and his upper rooms by injustice,  
who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing  
    and does not give them their wages,  
14who says, ‘I will build myself a great house  
    with spacious upper rooms,

And who cuts out windows for it,  
    paneling it with cedar  
    and painting it with vermilion.  
15Do you think you are a king  
    because you compete in cedar?

Did not your father eat and drink  
    and do justice and righteousness?  
    Then it was well with him.  
16He judged the cause of the poor and needy;  
    then it was well.  
Is not this to know me?  
    declares the Lord.

17But you have eyes and heart  
    only for your dishonest gain,  
for shedding innocent blood,  
    and for practicing oppression and violence.”

18Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah:

“They shall not lament for him, saying,  
    ‘Ah, my brother!’ or ‘Ah, sister!’  
They shall not lament for him, saying,  
    ‘Ah, lord!’ or ‘Ah, his majesty!’  
19With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried,  
    dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem.”

**Good Government**

**2018 07 22**

**So what do you do with a dead donkey? I dare venture that none of us in this room have faced that problem before. I must confess when Shelby invited me to do the Children’s Sermon, this dead donkey was my first thought. And I even had the perfect prop! As I confessed this temptation Katry volunteered and Shelby instantly agreed.**

**We have hundreds of scriptural passages with live donkeys. Yet Very few scripture passages mentioning a dead donkey. It’s such a challenging homiletical opportunity! But beware preacher: Jeremiah gained a death threat and fled to Egypt.**

**Fifty years ago my father brought me to Washington to participate in the Poor People’s Campaign. The march was the last event planned by Martin Luther King Jr. before a gunman snuffed out his life. The man was killed, but the mythic energy invested in and flowing from the man continues to this day. Still we carry his vision for what we might become. Across the nation he voiced the prophetic cry for justice and human rights. He called us to our best selves. He confronted the powerful with the suffering their privilege perpetrated on the poor and disenfranchised. He called us to create together a “beloved community.” For a time, the arc of history bent toward justice. Voting rights were enforced across the south. Fair housing was mandated. Restorative justice measures adopted. Yet in recent times we have seen the erosion of these values. Black and Latino men continue to be disproportionately incarcerated. Last month Antwon Rose was killed, joining dozens of unarmed African American males buried by their grieving mothers: Evidently black lives matter less than white lives. The recent isolation of refugee children from parents demonstrate that Latino families do not matter as much as white families. The pervasive gender terrorism of the culture has been exposed by the “Me too” movement. Female lives have not mattered as much as male lives. The minimum wage has not kept pace with the cost of living. Poor lives do not matter as much as rich lives. Cockroach white supremacy ideologies have come out from under the baseboards. Our systemic, sinful, tribal propensities are shamelessly promoted.**

**Friends of Christ, this is antithetical to the gospel.**

**But we have been here before. Following the civil war blacks were momentarily empowered only to be disempowered as the Union troops went back home. Lynchings, apartheid, Jim Crow laws and random incarceration insured white supremacy across the south. In the 1920s we saw the revival of the Klu Klux Klan which reframed the war to abolish slavery into the quest of the noble lost cause, which was anything but. Immigration has been a perpetual national anxiety limiting opportunity for Chinese, Japanese, Irish, Eastern European, Mexican, Jewish and other peoples across our history. A hundred years ago women couldn’t vote. Only successive waves of marches and jailings and physical beatings preceded a change of heart on the part of the male elected misogynist rulers. In the 1950s we saw the rise of the anticommunist crusade led by Joe McCarthy and the complicity of any number of so called statesmen to his slander and innuendo.**

**Yes, we have been here before.**

**Josiah was the King of Israel whose government was marked by the renewed standards of justice, the payment of fair wages, and shared economic benefits across the population. He is contrasted with King Jehoiakim who evidently abandoned the principles of justice. He cheated the workers who built his palaces. He benefited personally from their unjust exploitation. He saw only to his own selfish interests, killed the innocent, and violently oppressed the citizens he ruled. “This,” notes Walter Brueggemann, “is the description of a predatory economy!”**

**Here in this passage we see the Biblical qualities by which a government can be measured. With good government we see compassion for the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed who find sanctuary and justice. With bad government we see the rich, the powerful, the advantaged becoming even richer, more powerful and more advantaged. I leave to you then the judgment as to whether any particular government is good or bad, but here is the measurement criteria: How do the poor fair? Do they receive justice? Do they benefit from the exercise of government or is the government an extension of the oppression of the rich and powerful?**

**Research with infants has established that we are naturally both tribal and empathetic. Marilynne Robinson notes that while science might adequately describe human nature, Christian practice seeks to rise above it. Indeed, Jesus confounded the tribal boundaries of his day: He includes Gesenarines and Samaritans. He recognizes the full humanity of women. He challenges the social hierarchies of his culture. He presents a God accessible to everyone. Paul extends that embrace noting that in Christ there is no Gentile or Jew, no male or female, no slave or free. Extending that then there is no alien in contrast to a citizen, no advantaged and disadvantaged, no black lives that are any less valuable than white lives. Indeed, the faithful trajectory of Christ’s message is the expansion of our compassionate capacities and the reduction of our tribal propensities. The Christian is called to sacrifice the tribal self, to more fully discover the compassionate self. The Christian embraces the perspective that baptismal water is thicker than blood resisting this “natural” tribal inclination.**

**We lose self, to find self. We take up the cross, that is we join in solidarity with those who suffer more than we do. We engage our culture as we can to diminish the oppressive forces that crush the human spirit. Followers of Christ have crosses they are bearing for the benefit of others. And note this: bearing the cross, it is not our own suffering we bear, it is another’s. We bear the cross of another’s suffering. Our service flows to those who suffer. It does not flow toward those privileged few seeking to preserve or increase their privilege.**

**Note that this equity expressed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians and this instruction from Christ via Mark to bear the cross is an expectation for Christians, not necessarily for governments. What absolutely is required of governments is that they aspire to justice as God understands it. What is required of government is that the poor benefit from its ministrations. What is required from government is that it restrain predacious economic practices. Good government does not tear children from their mother’s arms. Good government does not ignore the plight of citizens suffering lead in their drinking water. Good government does not ignore hurricane victims who speak Spanish. Good government does not tolerate a profit based, racially biased incarceration system. Good government demonstrably benefits the poor.**

**I will confess that I believed Martin Luther King Jr. in his observation that the arc of history bends toward justice. But I am not so sure now seeing the rise of tyranny and oppression, the ubiquity of the lies, the ridicule, and the fear mongering. One thing that arc needs are leaders who serve those values of equality, justice, fairness, compassion and honesty. Harry Truman noted that “the next generation never learns anything from the previous one until it is brought home with a hammer.” He continues, “I’ve wondered why the next generation can’t profit from the generation before but they never do until they get knocked in the head by experience.” In other words, the arc of history only bends toward justice with the work of an experienced people who carry a vision of the beloved community. A people who will work to persuade others of the gospel way of love, equality and justice. A people who will not empower the fear monger, the liar or the dishonest ruler intent on some self-serving concentration of power.**

**So we Christians are called to deny the tribal self, discovering the deeper compassionate self. We take up the cross of another’s suffering. We expose the life crushing system that creates that suffering. And we do everything we can to change that. We bend the arc.**

**And Christians must demand that our governments, all governments, benefit the poor. That is the measurement: not GDP, not military might, not the Dow Jones. Jeremiah is clear: does the government benefit the poor? If not, like a dead donkey, it deserves to be dispatched, drug out to the garbage and dumped there.**