

## **SERMON** Pastor Cris

I spent a couple of days with Marines this week. You may have noticed. I will admit that these days I have had some amount of trepidation when I put on a uniform with a gold cross on it. In fact, it's a whole ball of emotions about what it means to step into my role as a Christian chaplain in an ostensibly, under the law, secular institution. My job, my calling, as a chaplain in the United States Navy is to support the free exercise of religion – those are the official words of policy – and that charge, implicitly and explicitly, includes a call to support service members of **all** faiths...and those with none at all.

You may have heard that current Pentagon leadership is moving to have chaplains wear only their chaplain device instead of the device and rank. For those who don't know, in many of my uniforms, I wear a cross on my left collar and my rank on my right collar.

I have a fair amount of autonomy when it comes to my role as a chaplain and what I'm doing at this exact moment, but I do feel like I should say that my views are my own and do not represent the United States Navy. And even saying that acknowledges that my work as a chaplain, especially as a reserve chaplain involves a fair amount of line walking and careful discernment. Whether I'm wearing a uniform or not, I have to find balance between my role as a Lutheran Christian pastor and as a staff officer in the United States Navy Reserve.

Back to the wearing of collar devices...the stated reason for the change in uniform policy is to focus the role of the chaplain as a spiritual advisor first and an officer second, to prioritize the chaplain's role within the command as unique, exceptional. To say I am concerned about this policy would be a bit of an understatement. Especially, when you combine this change with the reduction of acknowledged faith traditions within the military.

On the surface, you could take these changes as being an elevation of the importance of spiritual readiness and a focus on taking care of service members. But behind these changes is an underlying exclusivism that centers Christianity at the expense of other faith traditions. At work in policy and personal decisions is a theology that takes the claim from First Peter "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" as a call to define a whole culture by one particular worldview. It's a theology and ideology that focuses on excluding those who don't follow God the same way as those who are in power.

And to be clear, that worldview isn't holistically "Christian" but one particular and exclusivist Christian interpretation of God at work in the world. It has long been a danger of

Christian theology and interpretation of God's Word to take the message that comes from Jesus and the writers of New Testament letters and set up what has come to be known as Christianity as the exclusive club of proper, God-following, holy people.

We've learned over the years that scripture can be manipulated to reinforce the beliefs we want it to prove. "Manipulated" might be a strong word, because we all have a lens through which we read scripture, but it seems far too often that those who want to center Christianity within our pluralistic culture also want to take the most ungracious and exclusive reading of every passage that fits their narrative.

"Holy nation" becomes a belief that God must only love one nation. "I am the way" becomes a specific ideological interpretation of how God might save somebody. And if you don't follow that specific understanding of "the way" to be a disciple then you're out. You're not part of the exclusive club that God has made.

Being a Christian becomes a test of whether you can give the right answers to the right questions, and it stops being about God and what God is doing. Our salvation, despite whatever language might be placed around it, becomes all about what we say and do and largely ignores what **God has done**.

Of course, to believe in this exclusive view of God's salvation you have to be selective in your reading of scripture. When you read John 3:16, the fact that God loves "**the world**" is tempered by the rules of "believing." When you hear Jesus say, "I am the way..." you hear an explicit exclusion and damnation of other ways to follow God.

So then I would ask, what exactly are the ways we believe? What are we supposed to do as God's royal priesthood? What does it mean to follow in the way of Jesus?

We heard it in this convoluted answer that Jesus gave to Philip. Every time I read Jesus' response to Philip's statement, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." I imagine Philip standing there – or sitting there – blinking in confusion. I'm not really sure Jesus' circular statements about how we see and know the Father brought a lot of clarity in the room, especially when the whole picture hadn't been revealed. But right in the middle of that response, Jesus told the disciples, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do..."

Believing isn't a thought. Salvation isn't about being part of the club. Following the way isn't about setting up the rules for who's in and who's out. The call on God's people, the holy nation, the chosen people is to do what Jesus did.

I find that particularly helpful – and challenging – when I look at the state of the world. Lost in the understanding of exclusive, exceptionalist Christianity is the actual way that Jesus lived. “What would Jesus do?” has fallen a bit out of fashion, but it should’ve always been, “What **has Jesus done?**” I asked a group of Marines in worship on Friday morning, what Jesus did. And they gave the right answers...healed the sick, fed the hungry, saved people.

If we’re going to be a holy nation, if we’re going to be God’s chosen people, then we do what Jesus did for the world. That challenges the notion that it’s about drawing lines about who’s in and who’s out, because Jesus often brought in those who were “supposed to be” out. That means we are tasked with feeding people who are hungry – no matter what they know about Jesus. That means we care for those who are struggling without making them conform to our point of view.

That means that we aren’t sent into the world to wield a sword, we’re called to non-violence. We’re called to be peacemakers. The cross is and always has been the ultimate non-violent response to the power of this world.

If we’re going to stand on the cornerstone that is Christ, then we have to give up the power of this world and trust in God’s love. We are a chosen people, not so we can exclude others, but so that we can do what Jesus did. Because the world needs to see the message of the cross. The world needs to see God’s love. We don’t show that by putting a gold cross on our collar, or around our neck, or in our gathering space. We show that by doing what Jesus did. By loving the world. Amen.