

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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PRIMERO DIOS

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost

September 27, 2020

EZEKIEL 18:1-4,25-32 | PSALM 25:1-8

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13 | MATTHEW 21:23-32

I have learned a powerful phrase from our hardworking immigrant families from Mexico – “Primero Dios.”

God first. God, when all is said and done, in the end. God above all. From every angle, God at the center.

In these difficult days – particularly as I sit with the tragic double verdict for Breonna Taylor that offers civil damages but no accountability for systemically unjust use of state force – I find myself feeling as if the china cabinet in my dining room, filled with so many of the gifts my wife and I received at our wedding, has fallen to the floor and all has shattered into a million irreparable pieces. I find myself mumbling little encouragements to myself, hopeful mantras. “Confess your sins.” “Confess the faith of your Baptism.” “Be quick to listen, slow to anger.” “Pray!” (Wear your mask.) Bless your enemies. Vote....

Things seem to be either breaking or burning. So we pray for our leaders, our elders, the privileged, the disadvantaged, the savvy, the misinformed, all who are responsible in whatever way for the breaking and the burning. We pray, Lord, have mercy on us. I find myself learning to say: *Primero Dios.*

The apostle Paul wrote to the Church at Philipp: “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

We don't know exactly what the disagreement was at the church. It was deep enough however that we know that Paul found himself quoting a hymn about how Jesus put aside all privilege and authority to become a slave bearing an unspeakable sacrifice for our salvation. He tried to sing them to their senses.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

Is this what it means to put God at the center of our lives? To say “Primero Dios!” . Jesus took himself out of the focus of the picture. He de-centered himself from the usual narrative of power and authority. He enabled God and humans to tell their story from a wider angle, with a different lens.

This de-centering, this putting others before us, is what we have to learn to do, together, as we learn and embrace each other’s stories.

A friend surprised me the other day with coming out with an eloquent correction to a sermon he had given marking the anniversary of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution which gave women the right to vote. He praised the well known leaders for their courage and perseverance. Toward the end of the service, during a time of sharing, a black woman informed him that she felt and saw it a little differently.

She made him go back to the historical record. It turns out, if you tell the story more completely, in the 1870s the earliest suffragettes were against black men getting the vote before white women. And then later, at the turn of the century, after black men could vote and white women still couldn’t, white women really didn’t care whether black women showed up to claim their right. In fact, they were hostile to it, often worried it would hurt their cause.

But the fact is, between the 15th and the 19th amendment, black women did show up and demanded to be recognized. And thanks be to God that we have been given a chance to be a bit more honest about our stories. The devil loves it, not only when we tell lies, but when we leave out the truth.

Jesus was notoriously apolitical. We should remember that Jesus did cast his vote for democracy or our precious Constitution. Yet his proclamation of the Kingdom of God always has political consequences. He stands outside our human power struggles on purpose. In due time, all principalities, parties and powers will place themselves under divine authority, every knee will bend and every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord.

Or sometimes the most helpful way to say it is.... that Caesar is NOT Lord. And if we worship at the altars of the idols of power and politics, we will miss the most important thing of all. God at the center

calling us not just to empty words and partial narratives, but to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.” Primero Dios.

Paul focuses on the ethical transformation that comes with de-centering ourselves from our narratives. However, he surprises us with another claim. He will end his letter with a call to rejoice in one another, delight in one another. If we keep putting ourselves first, we will never receive this gift of joy that is at the center of the Gospel. It is our most unalienable right as Christians to live without fear, to serve others without worry of the consequence, to feel God’s pleasure, his delight, his joy in us.

When we put ourselves in the center, we always get it wrong.

“If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus!”

In our Gospel lesson today, what begins as an academic argument about authority and power, ends as a simple story of de-centering, of getting out of the way in the most active and creative way. Of the two sons who were asked by their father to go into the fields to work that day, who do you suppose did his will? The one who said he would and didn’t, the one who put himself first? Or the one who was at first full of himself, said he wouldn’t, but then ultimately did?

We have so much work to do, to see this world as God sees it. To see ourselves as a part of the people that does justice, loves mercy and walks humbly with their God. Wherever we look today, wherever we walk today, whatever testimony we receive of another, we can remind ourselves of this ongoing task with these marvelous, infinite watchwords.

Primero Dios.