

First Congregation Church of Winchester, UCC
11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 4, 2024, Communion Sunday

Rev. Dr. Jessica McArdle

Title: *“Who Would Have Believed That the Bible is Political?”*

Text: from 2nd Samuel 11:26 – 12:13a

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. ²⁷When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, ¹²¹and the LORD sent Nathan to David. Nathan came before King David, and told him this parable, ‘There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.’ ⁵Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.’ ⁷The prophet Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; ⁸I gave you your predecessor, Saul’s house, and his wives into your care, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. ⁹Why have you despised God’s Word to do what is evil in God’s sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹³David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’

Text from John 6:24-35

²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³²Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the

world.”³⁴They said to him, “*Sir, give us this bread always.*”³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Opening Prayer: In these moments of stillness, you come to each of us, Divine Maker, full of light, compassion and truth. In the sharing of today’s message, may all that is spoken here and meditated upon, be acceptable in your sight. We ask this in Redeemer’s name. Amen.

Sermon:

Early in my ministry, I served a church that formed a partnership with an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Jamaica Plain. We were in regular contact and frequently worshiped together, participated in communion, and preached at one another's congregations.

One of the most formative lessons I gained from this partnership was how astonishingly important the subject of politics was to the black community. Be it about housing, healthcare, or ensuring that a harmful utility wasn't encroaching upon a poorer neighborhood; you could be sure it would be discussed and preached about. Because many of these folks experienced first-hand the injustices that come with being people of color, because there were those in the congregation who were just getting by, these weren't obscure topics but inequities that cut close to home. In fact, if a preacher didn't touch on matters of social and economic injustice, then something was amiss. In the black community, to be a good preacher, as well as a pastor, *meant taking on politics.*

Yet, in contrast to this black congregation, the church I served and loved was primarily white and well-off. A small town marked by good schools; there was an ice cream shop on the corner and a restaurant that catered to the local population. The congregation were hardworking, good, and generous-minded people. Yet I quickly realized that unlike the AME church, we were in partnership with, discussing politics in the church that had called me was clearly off the table. There was a real fear that discussions along this vein could cause disagreement and make folks uncomfortable. Thus, in contrast to the black congregation we partnered with, to be a good preacher and pastor in my church *meant avoiding politics*.

So, I began ministry with two very different approaches to politics within congregational life, not partisan politics but politics in general. I came to appreciate Martin Luther King, Jr's observation that when it comes to the racial divide in America, it is nowhere more prominent than during Sunday morning worship, for it isn't just the color of our skin that divides us. *What really divides us is what we perceive is at stake not only in our common life but in the world itself*.

Our two lectionary readings for today seem very different thematically, but what they share in common is that they are both steeped in politics. Both of them challenge us to think about the notion of Kingship and what truly nurtures in the eyes of God and in the context of community. The passage from 2nd Samuel reveals the

consequences when kings take it upon themselves to be above the law rather than beholden to the very people whom they are charged to protect. 2nd Samuel unflinchingly exposes the destructive pattern of behavior that follows unchecked power. Yet, in contrast, the passage from the Gospel According to John, God-in-Christ presents us with a radically different understanding and lived reality.

(show semi-portrait of Bathsheba)



Here is a semi-portrait by Rembrandt of the beautiful but unnamed woman that the prophet Nathan spoke of in today's passage from 2nd Samuel. Her name was Bathsheba, who herself came from a distinguished family. When Bathsheba married, she married well. Her husband, Uriah, was part of the King's elite fighting force.

Being a foreigner, Uriah adopted a Hebrew name to marry Bathsheba, which is yet another irony in this troubling narrative. Just as the Israelites had once been foreigners in the land of Egypt, the law of Moses charged them not to oppress or maltreat the foreigners who lived amongst them. In the case of Uriah and other foreigners, and because of

this covenantal framework and law, as outsiders, they were afforded protection that *rulers, in particular*, were charged to uphold.

Looking upon this painting of Bathsheba, her face has sorrow and resignation as she reads the summons from the King. Though married, because her husband was away at battle, Bathsheba was powerless. As an absolute ruler, the King was accountable to no one. Above the law, he could act with impunity, and neither his advisors nor the courts would hold him accountable. Having seen Bathsheba bathing while his soldiers were off to battle, David was determined to get his hands on her. And he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. Ultimately, David would arrange for Bathsheba's husband to be murdered. So, Uriah, the loyal soldier, wouldn't learn that the King he served and put his life on the line for had raped and impregnated his wife.

Delving into this troubling narrative, makes me appreciate why Black-Lives-Matter insist on saying the victim's name out loud. Today's scripture isn't just about power but what happens when power is flagrantly, recklessly, and callously abused. This passage shows the devastating trauma and legacy of pain that occurs when *toxic politics, birthed in violence, is unleashed*.

A couple of months ago, I attended a panel discussion offered through Third Act Faith. Third Act is an organization for folks sixty and over...you know, us older people. Initially, Third Act's principal focus was safeguarding our planet, confronting the powers that place

profit over the wellbeing of God's people and Creation itself. Yet appreciating that policies that protect our water, our air, and the species that we share this world with *are beholden to whoever is in office*, Third Act has joined with countless other organizations in safeguarding the common good through the necessity of *getting out the vote* – be it advocating for LGBTQ folk, people of color, people with disabilities, healthcare, economic security, as well as this planet we call home.

One of the clergy representatives on the panel discussion that night for Third Act was a rabbi from the reformed tradition, Stephanie Kolin. Rabbi Kolin began by telling us a story from the Midrash, an ancient commentary drawn from the Bible. In her presentation, the rabbi asked us to imagine God walking through the Garden of Eden with Adam, taking in the beauty of Creation while conversing. According to the Midrash, God stopped, turned to Adam, and said, "You must not destroy this, Adam, for if you do, there will be no one to come after you to repair it."

Rabbi Kolin then emphatically stated, "I don't know of a more political document than the Torah, which is the first five books of the Hebrew Bible." Just as Christians draw strength from Jesus' example in the Gospel when speaking truth to power, in Judaism, the stellar narrative that defines their faith is Moses confronting Pharaoh. Kolin emphasized this because the word politics comes from the Greek word *polis*. *Polis* asks how people will live with each other. *Polis* inquires

on how communities will take care of each other. In other words, *Polis* strives for what makes for the common good.

How will we live with each other? How will we and wider communities take care of one another? What makes for the common good?



(show an image of Jesus feeding the 5,000)

Today's reading from John's Gospel follows Jesus feeding 5,000 people. This pivotal event took place along what is commonly known as the Sea of Galilee. Only in Jesus' day, it was known as the Sea of Tiberius, as its coastline abutted a city named after the Roman Emperor, Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus. In the year 20 AD, the local ruler, Herod Antipas (the same one who beheaded John the Baptist and ultimately executed Jesus), established the city as an economic powerhouse and an extraction enterprise for the fishing industry, spawning the ancient equivalent of 'trickle-down economics.' According to author Diana Butler Bass, ultimately, this "city and its port emerged as an economic center for the globalization of the Roman fishing industry, an extractive enterprise that exploited local fishermen, raised

taxes on the poor, shipped the best fish to the richest parts of the empire, leaving only scrappy remains to feed the residents. "

Yet after generously feeding several thousand, Jesus abruptly left. Given the exploitive practices of their rulers and the cruelty and hardship inflicted on them, the people sought to force Jesus to become King. And who can blame them?

In today's reading, what follows after the people pile into boats and cross over to the port of Capernaum to find Jesus is an exchange between themselves and Jesus about what constitutes for nourishment. For a people all too acquainted with hunger and struggling to get by, today's text gives us an exchange between a people desperately trying to survive, and Jesus, who they are convinced can provide for them in the wake of uncertainty, violence, and deprivation.

In the 21st century, it is easy to write off the throngs of people who scrambled after Jesus, and who kept on insisting that he feed them with palpable nourishment, as simply not understanding what Jesus was trying to tell them. Yet what if Jesus' nourishment isn't just an individual matter but involves the community and Creation as a whole, uplifted and emboldened by the all-encompassing love of God?

Jesus said to the gathered masses, "For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life *to the world*." Then, the people spoke from their hearts when they implored him, saying, "*Sir, give us this bread always.*"

Imagine, in these times of grave uncertainty and much fear, what we would ask of Jesus. Would we trust him enough to reveal our deep loneliness? Would we trust him enough to acknowledge that we are sorely afraid and wonder what will become of the world and each of us? Would we risk revealing our own deep ambivalence about the cost of following him and dare to ask if it is all worth it?

Imagine Jesus saying to us, "I AM the salve for aching loneliness. I AM the assurance that vanquishes fear. I AM the one who abides when you wonder if you can go on."

Consider that when Jesus said to people, I AM the Bread of Life, it was a startling use of language. In all of Jesus' 'I AM' statements, he stepped beyond the common usage in his day. In Greek, the application of pronouns differs from how we practice them. So, by prefacing this statement with I AM, Jesus connected directly to the identity of God's self, as revealed to Moses in the Old Testament from the Book of Exodus. When Jesus spoke this way, he didn't merely speak for God; instead, Jesus revealed himself as God. So, when Jesus said, "I AM the Bread of Life," he spoke not as a mere mortal, but as the Word Made Flesh, the Sovereign God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. His was an entirely different model of Kingship. His words and actions pointed to a radically different understanding of God and God's self.

I began today by recalling a partnership between the church I served early in my ministry and a black congregation. One night, I

attended a Maundy Thursday service held by the AME church we were in partnership with. My role was to not only represent the church I was called to serve but also take part in their annual ritual of foot washing. As a clergy member, I would wash the feet of those in the AME congregation.

It was a practice not done in the church I served. But when I took part in it that evening, the experience impacted me indelibly. For the woman I knelt before to wash her feet, was a direct descendant of slaves. Well up in years, her feet and hands were riddled by arthritis. It was all I could do to gently remove her shoes without causing her additional pain. Yet when I finally got up the courage to look directly at her face from where I was kneeling on the floor below, the impact of that encounter hit me.

This woman's grey/brown eyes, framed by her darkened and lined face, were looking directly down at my younger self, a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed woman. I wondered as I looked up if she was recalling what her ancestors had experienced. True, I may not have been the one responsible for the cruelty and wanton abuse heaped upon her distant relatives. But I was keenly aware that I embodied many unearned societal privileges bestowed by the genetic accident of being white.

When my eyes met her gaze, she wasn't smiling. But she didn't turn away from me either.

With all the gentleness I could muster, I did what I could *to meet the moment*. Taking the woman's feet, I lowered them into the warm water, bathing them and rubbing my hands against her weathered callouses. I gently caressed her feet as I would have done with my children. I then took each foot and dried it gently with a towel. Then, with great care, I put each of her shoes back on. Placing the basin aside, I stood up and took her hands. "Do you want to return to your seat?" I asked her, looking down at her face. She nodded, and then, taking my arm, she leaned on me while I slowly walked back to where she had been seated.

After the foot washing and later that evening, I took part in communion, remembering Jesus' profound act of self-giving love. Yet Jesus' self-giving love is intended to lead us to do what we can *to meet the moment*. Indeed, to love one's neighbor and all of Creation may well be practicing the best kind of politics, God's politics, which is seeking after the common good and doing all that we can to be repairers of this fragile but achingly beautiful world.

Amen.