



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"Good Company"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On October 27, 2024, from Psalms 14 & 112

My family told me not to go, but I wanted to see it for myself. None of my friends could go with me, but I signed up anyway and was told the event would take place at the Embassy Suites Concord. It was billed *The Eleventh Hour: A Meeting for Faith Leaders*, and I made a terrible mistake assuming it was only for "faith leaders." Word of Donald Trump's visit had leaked, and I arrived to find a field filled with thousands of cars. Our keynote speaker from Faith in the 21st Century, Dr. Butler, told me I should go be a witness, so I did. I walked a mile to the venue passing dozens of booths selling Trump merchandise: MAGA hats, sweatshirts, jackets, shoes, stickers, and t-shirts that said: "I'm voting for the convicted felon," "God, Guns, & Trump," "2024: Too big to rig," "Save America," "Never surrender," and a few slogans I can't say in church. At the corner of Bruton Smith Blvd., the police directing traffic were talking with people passing by about their mutual love for Trump.

When I got closer to the hotel, I could see hundreds of people waiting in line to get inside. I quickly learned the venue was at capacity, and they weren't letting anyone else in. But that did not deter these pilgrims. They were disappointed, but enjoying themselves, enraptured in conversation about the election, Trump, and Jesus. The gathering was a cross between an evangelical church service and a *NASCAR* race, except everyone was cheering for the same driver and wearing the same colors. I was surprised how normal everyone was acting. I talked with accountants, teachers, bankers, pastors, and homemakers. Parents were there with their children, I saw every age from college students to senior citizens. Catholics and Protestants of all denominations were joined together in a spirit of hope and hospitality. People were giving each other free water, stickers, homemade ribbons, pins, books, and souvenirs.

I expected the crowd to be hostile, but there was a sense of joy, excitement, and celebration. I was astonished to see regular everyday people experiencing this level of comradery and community. In some ways, the ordinariness made it more disturbing to me. As I reflected on my time with the MAGA community, I realized it makes sense that in an age of social alienation which has been radically intensified by the internet and social media our which our Surgeon General has described as an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation" that Americans would gravitate to a movement that offers them connection and community. During a time of such unwavering grief, loss, meaninglessness, nihilism, and despair, it makes sense Americans would gravitate toward a movement that offers them meaning and purpose, as well as something and someone to believe in. While I don't agree with the people I talked to in Concord, I feel like I understand them a little better and as people of faith we have a moral responsibility to try to understand each other especially when we don't agree.



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In the commercials for the movie *Wicked*, the Wizard, played by Jeffrey Goldblum says, "The best way to bring folks together is to give them a real good enemy." This is often the case, and it'd be easy to chalk up the MAGA phenomenon to the power of common enemies, collective hatred, and shared grievance, which has always been an animating force for social movements throughout history. But there's something far more compelling being offered by the MAGA movement than scapegoating immigrants, Marxists, and leftists as enemies of the State. They ran out of room for "faith leaders" at the Embassy Suites, so I went home to watch the event on PBS. What I witnessed was very familiar to me. As someone raised in an evangelical community, I've heard a similar message many times in my life.

Trump began by telling the story of his anointing. While they were in the primary, he and Ben Carson went to speak at a church and Carson whispered in Trump's ear, "You know you're going to win, right?" This made Carson "John the Baptist," preparing the way for one who was "greater." Then Trump talked about his childhood experiences going to Norman Vincent Pele's church to listen to sermons about God saving the CEO of General Motors from alcoholism. At the climax, Trump told his personal salvation story of nearly being assassinated in Butler, PA and told the audience, "I should have been killed that day, but God saved my life so that I could be President for such a time as this." Then he called on all Christians and all gun owners to vote, as if they were the same group.

After giving his testimony, Trump passionately claimed he fought harder for Christians than any President in history and listed his accomplishments: blocking the IRS from coming after Christian groups, appointing 300 pro-life judges and 3 Supreme Court justices, bringing prayer back to schools, recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, giving back the Golan Heights, proposing an initiative at the UN to end religious persecution, banning LGBTQ books in schools, and defining gender as the sex of one's birth. Finally, he concluded with a promise: "On my first day in office, I will create a federal task force dedicated to fighting anti-Christian bias in this country," and the crowd erupted with glee.

It's too simple to say what brought millions of Americans together into the MAGA community is hostility or hatred. It is not hatred, but religious fervor and extremism that fuels this movement, a far more powerful force. What the MAGA movement offers people is participation in an extreme religious community who is fighting to save the soul of America. This may sound absurd, but it's the feeling of those who follow Trump and attend his rallies, and it's the same religious fervor on display when the capitol was attacked on January 6. This is why there was outrage when Vice President Harris told anti-abortion protestors shouting "Jesus is Lord" that they were at the wrong rally. Trump's supporters see Harris as anti-Christian leader who wants to persecute the followers of Jesus.



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I have learned from my mentors to “be easy on people and hard on systems.” It is not helpful to shame people for participating in the MAGA movement. What I fear is that we are not taking it seriously as an extreme religious movement; that we are so overloaded nothing registers and, that we are in danger of being asleep at the wheel. As the old quote says, “When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag, waving a Bible, and carrying a cross.”ⁱ I’m acutely aware some will bemoan my words today as another “political” sermon. But unlike the *LA Times* and *The Washington Post*, we have a “Free Pulpit.” Seriously, there is too much at stake. What would you have wanted people to say in 1930s Germany? What kind of faith leader I would be if I said nothing at a time when our religion has been coopted by extremists and misused to oppress our fellow Americans? It would be a dereliction of duty. I would be the definition of what the book of Psalms calls a “fool.”

Generations of interpreters have taken this famous line, “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God,’” to be an indictment of anyone who is atheist. But the ancient near eastern world had no Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. Everyone believed in God. The question was not “Is there a God,” but “Which one?” And the Hebrew word *nāvā*/, which is translated as “fool” had nothing to do with belief or even intelligence. We use the word “fool” today, as a synonym for “dumb,” “stupid,” or “silly,” but thankfully, the Psalmist did not condemn people for having a lower intelligence or messing around. Instead, when *nāvā*/ appears in the Bible it is always moral assessment rather than an intellectual one.

Nāvā/, or fool, is not a description of a person’s identity, but behavior that is “futile, worthless, or good-for-nothing.” In Psalm 14, a fool is described as someone that does no good, engages in corrupt and abominable deeds, acts perversely, and ‘eats people up like bread,’ always reminds me of the Far Side cartoon where a wolf running for political office is speaking to a crowd of sheep and says, “I will eat you.” One sheep looks to the other and says, “I like how he tells it like it is.” All the behaviors associated with foolishness in the Psalm are moral activities, but there’s nothing truly specific until verse six where the Psalmist says, “you would confound the plans of the poor, but the Lord is their refuge.” Foolishness has something to do with how we treat the poor.

Notice Psalm 14 says a fool is someone who says in their heart “There is no God.” That means they might still shout “Jesus is Lord” with their mouths or even believe there’s a God in their minds. Because a fool isn’t someone who believes there is no God, it’s someone who lives like there is no God. We’ve been in a series on wisdom literature the last seven weeks and one of the surprising places we find wisdom is in the book of Psalms. Commonly referred to as “the prayerbook” or “hymnal of the Bible,” Psalms are poetic expressions of praise, petition, grief, lament, suffering, or thanksgiving, that were used in the liturgies of the Jewish people throughout the year. And they have become some of the most beloved parts of scripture for Christian spirituality and for funerals, like Psalm 23.



Yet, interspersed between these songs and prayers are a few Psalms of wisdom, like we heard today, which make it clear a wise person is not someone old, smart, intelligent, experienced, scholarly, or cunning, but someone who lives a gracious, merciful, righteous, and generous life. It's fascinating how economic the Bible is when it comes to wisdom. It may leave other areas of the spiritual life up to mystery, but there's no question when it comes to what makes a person wise. The writers are specific in ways that make us squirm. Those who care for and protect the poor are the are wise. As Psalm 112 says, the wise are those who "deal generously, who lend, who conduct affairs with justice, who distribute freely, who give to the poor."

It turns out, the more we give away, the wiser we become and the more we keep the more foolish we become. Wisdom abounds as generosity abounds. It's no surprise that in one of his parables Jesus called a person foolish not because of their intelligence, but because they had an abundant harvest and instead of giving away the excess crops to the poor, they built bigger barns for themselves. So, Jesus said, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. So, it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God." Here we see that Jesus' definition of wisdom, called for the creation of community where resources are shared and there is enough for everyone's need but not enough for foolish greed.

This week we lost one of the most important faith leaders in modern history, father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, who grew up as an oppressed person in Lima Peru and rose to become an extraordinary scholar. He delivered a powerful statement to the Catholic Church in 1968 which famously said, "God has a preferential option for the poor," and inspired movements like Black liberation, women's liberation, and LGBTQ+ liberation. In an interview before his death, Gutiérrez told *The Jesuit Review*, "No serious Christian can quietly ignore the situation of the poor. It is no longer possible for someone to say, 'I didn't know' about their suffering. The faces of the poor must now be confronted. Poverty is not simply misfortune; it is injustice, and Christians must take the Gospel message seriously. We cannot forgo our responsibility to address unjust economic conditions."ⁱⁱ

Throughout his magnum opus Gutiérrez explained, "In the Bible, poverty is a scandalous condition inimical to human dignity and therefore contrary to the will of God. [Therefore], greatest sacrament of the church is not the body and blood of Jesus, but our poor and oppressed neighbors. The poverty the poor experience, however, is not a call for generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different order.



If there is no friendship with them [the poor] and no sharing of the life of the poor, then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals. So, if you say you love the poor, then name them!"ⁱⁱⁱ

The Psalms and the finest theologians in history agree that God is the refugee of the poor and those who want to be like God or Jesus, and want to be wise, will prioritize their relationship with poor. The wise will live in solidarity with the poor, find company with the poor, engage in community with the poor, be generous to the poor, lend money to the poor, distribute freely to the poor, conduct affairs justly with the poor, give resources to the poor. This is the wisdom of the Psalms, it is the primary focus of Jesus' parables, and it is truly the essence of our faith. Call it political if you want to, but it's just the gospel—forwards and backwards.

Today, MAGA movement leaders are saying that when Jesus talked about us "the least of these," he wasn't talking about poor at all, but "persecuted Christians." A woman named, Allie Beth Stuckey, whose name aptly describes her theological position, has been platformed by Calvinists who write, "the least of these is not a blanket statement about the church's responsibility to meet the needs of all the poor, or a definitive statement about federal budgets." But as a child reading the Psalms Jesus learned the exact opposite, that God is always the refuge of the poor and God's people are too. They are perverting what Jesus meant by the "least of these."

Have we surrendered a faith founded by a poor Palestinian Jew who had no place to lay his head, said "blessed are the poor," welcomed the poor, healed the poor, ate with the poor, and told us to invite the poor into our homes, to a movement led by a trust fund billionaire? It's easy to get focused on the leader, isn't it? But it's not about the person, it's about the policies. Last time, the Trump administration gave tax cuts to billionaires, made steep cuts to SNAP benefits cutting 700,000 poor people off food stamps, and undermined important programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, housing vouchers, and Supplemental Security Income for the disabled and elderly.^{iv} The Wharton school has determined the Trump campaign's new economic policy would eliminate social security in six years, keep worker's wages stagnant, increase individual debt by 10%, and elevate the national debt by \$4.1 trillion.^v As the Poverty to Prosperity Program said, "They're attacking the most vulnerable people in our nation and creating additional barriers for people seeking assistance." There is a war on poor people in America today, and Christians should be on the side of the poor!



I don't blame people for finding community in the MAGA movement, but Christianity has never been about simply finding community for the sake of community. Community is important, but cults have community. Gangs have community. Militias have community. Following Jesus is about more than being part of a squad, group, or clan. Every time we allowed our faith to be determined solely by participation in a community, it has led to horrific atrocities like the Crusades, the Inquisition, Colonialism, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Segregation, Apartheid, the Ku Klux Klan, and more. Jesus intended for there to be a transcendent purpose that gives the Christian community a reason for existing, and that is our preferential option for the poor and oppressed people. The church does not exist solely for the sake of community but is a community that exists for the sake of the poor. And as Pope Francis had said, "We will be judged by our relationship with the poor."^{vi}

Following Jesus is not about waving a flag, wearing a hat, rocking a t-shirt, owning a gun, going to rallies, grasping for power, believing in God, shouting "Jesus is Lord," or even being a part of the right community. It is about being in the company of God, which requires us to be in good company with the poor. Christians are not known by the clothes they wear or proclamations they make, but by their love for the poor, marginalized, and least of these among us. And, as it turns out, this is not just the true measure of a Christian or the Church, but as someone wise once said, "A nation's greatness is determined by how it treats its weakest members...the moral test of government is how it treats children, the elderly, the sick, the needy, and the disabled."^{vii} This means any political leader, campaign, movement, or community that says that it is Christian, but does not actively care for the poor, is simply spouting a big pile of *nā vā*, a big pile of foolishness. As followers of Jesus, we must remember that our community exists for the sake of the poor, and wisdom can only be found in solidarity with the poor. So let the fools shout, "Jesus is Lord," while their hearts say, "There is no God," and let rest of us continue to love the least of these with every fiber of our being, because when all is said and done, our church, our religion, our nation, and our lives will be judged by the company we keep.

ⁱ This quote has been commonly misattributed to Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, H.L. Menken, Huey Long, James Waterman Wise, and George Carlin. All have said similar things, but not this exact quote. For instance, Carlin said, "When fascism comes to America, it will not be in brown and black shirts. It will not be with jackboots. It will be Nike sneakers and Smiley shirts..."

ⁱⁱ Daniel Hartnett, "Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutierrez," *America: The Jesuit Review*, February 3, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Orbis: 1973.

^{iv} Natalie Baptiste and Jessica Washington, "Trump Isn't Waging a War on Poverty. He's Waging a War on Poor People." *Mother Jones*, February 14, 2020.

^v <https://budgetmodel.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/2024/8/26/trump-campaign-policy-proposals-2024>

^{vi} HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS, "Seek Jesus in the poor," MORNING MASS IN THE CHAPEL OF THE *DOMUS SANCTAE MARTHA*E, April 6, 2020.

^{vii} This is a combination of a quote often attributed to Gandhi and another from Hubert Humphrey.