

Today we begin the last four-week series in our summer sermon series entitled, "The Problem of Christian Nationalism." Before we dive in two things: 1. As one of your pastors here at Triune, I am well aware of the weariness and divisiveness of partisan politics and people not wanting to talk about politics at church and for very good reason. However, we are living in a time when there is an unhealthy mix of faith and politics and there is confusion and misinformation among us. I love this country, and I identify as a follower of Jesus Christ. I have many family members who have served or to serve this country. To be clear, to stand against Christian nationalism is not to stand against this country, nor is it to stand against or belittle the efforts of any who serve or who have served this country. As before, some Christians today claim that America is a Christian nation. People have strong opinions about this and thinking of America as a Christian nation is dangerous and untrue. Yet there is a movement that desires our nation's laws to be based on the Bible. And that is where we have to be careful because the interpretation of the Bible divides congregations, let alone political parties. If America is ever to deserve the description of a Christian community, it will not happen because Congress passes religious laws. It will happen because Christian residents in America live faithfully. One of the great things about this country is that we have freedom of religion. America is a country for not only Christians but also the Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, etc. Please know that I love you all, and I'm preaching to myself as much as I am preaching to you. 2. Before we talk about the problem of Christian Nationalism, we need to define Christian Nationalism. There are many definitions out there. A simple definition for the purpose of

this series is “an ideology or position that privileges the presence, role, and voice of Christians over non-Christians in this country” (Rev. Jenny McDevitt). I also like scholar and preacher N.T. Wright’s definition. “Christian Nationalism is impoverished as it seeks a kingdom without a cross. It pursues a victory without mercy. It acclaims God’s love of power rather than the power of God’s love.” Christian Nationalism is all about power and control as evidenced in this definition: Christian Nationalism is just plain old nationalism in which Jesus is trotted out as a mascot to endorse something that bears absolutely no resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount or apostolic Christianity. Why the need to think carefully about this topic? Because history repeatedly demonstrates how easily governments can wrap themselves in Christian language while moving in profoundly unchristian directions. Constantine was the first Christian nationalist (3rd century). Let’s move a little closer to home in history. Matilda Joselyn Gage, who in the 1800’s throughout her life, fought tirelessly for religious freedom, adamantly opposing the many constitutional amendments introduced in the latter half of the 19th century that sought to establish the United States as an explicitly Christian nation. She also worked feverishly in the early women’s rights movement in the US, which caused an ongoing tension resulting in a split between her and Susan B. Anthony. Anthony sought a partnership with the large and powerful Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), led by Frances Willard, whom Gage considered to be “the most dangerous woman in America,” given her drive for a theocracy rather than a democracy. “The WCTU had one absorbing purpose: to ensure that Christ is this world’s King. King of its

courts, its camps, and its commerce; King of its colleges and its cloisters; King of its customs and its constitutions” (Renee Barry, *Church & State*, Vol. 79, Number 6). Christian Nationalism is not just something that happens in America. Adolf Hitler declared in Germany in 1933: “We want to fill our culture again with the Christian spirit.” “He spoke about defending morality, protecting Christianity, resisting cultural corruption, and restoring national greatness. And many German Christians applauded him. Not because all of them were evil. But because fear, nationalism, cultural anxiety, and political tribalism can deeply cloud spiritual discernment. One of the many dangers here are political movements using Christian language while slowly demanding ultimate loyalty for themselves. The church must never forget: Jesus is Lord. And every nation stands beneath His judgment” (James Bell, Facebook). So let’s turn to the text for today. If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it many times, when it comes to Scripture, know the context. Up until this point in Mark’s Gospel, the emphasis has largely been on the miraculous deeds of Jesus. Very little has been said about Jesus’ identity that enables him to perform these miracles. Until now. One could safely assume that there was some confusion in expectations not only in Jesus’ identity/titles but also in loyalties/allegiances as his disciples. Peter and the other disciples are not picking up what Jesus is throwing down, and the path to the cross is getting shorter. Before turning to God’s Word for us this day, let us **PRAY. READ.**

Jesus’ first question right out of the gate to his disciples is, “Who do people say that I am” (v. 27)? And after a few incorrect answers were

given, Jesus gets more personal. He asks them, "But who do you say that I am" (v. 29)? Peter gets it correct when he answers, "The Messiah." This is a huge deal because for the first time, one of Jesus' disciples dared to speak out loud that He was Israel's prophesied savior. For some 700+ years, the people of Israel have been awaiting the King that God promised them before the fall of Israel. This ruler would come from the line of David and restore security and prosperity to the chosen people. Because of the prophecies told, they were expecting a strong-man, a warrior whose political power and military might could not be rivaled. "When the disciples realized that their personal rabbi was, in fact, this future ruler of Israel, their self-image no doubt began to swell. Their imaginations began to run wild. Soon Jesus of Nazareth was going to sit on a throne, scepter in hand, and they would sit alongside him. They would be the king's key lieutenants, highest counselors, and most influential proxies of Jerusalem. For that bubble to suddenly burst- for Jesus to tell them that, actually, He would soon be tortured and executed- must have felt like a celestial sucker punch. The 'things' that Peter worried about twenty centuries ago are the same things that preoccupy us today: wealth, prestige, control. All of this competes with Jesus for our hearts. Everything/one to which we attach significance in his life- family, country, politics, bodily health, even the clothes we wear and the food we eat- can become a substitute religion" (Alberta). "Jesus- just like the Gospel author- embarks on a project of recasting who 'the Christ' is and what he will do. Jesus won't wield power over others; instead, powerful and cynical people will have their way with him" (Skinner). We do not know the underlying reason for Peter's rebuke of

Jesus. Mark doesn't tell us. Clearly, Peter was moved to express his strong disapproval of Jesus' pronouncement. Although we don't know why, I wonder if "by calling Jesus "Messiah," or "the Christ," Peter declares, "I think you're the one who will purify our society, reestablish Israel's supremacy among the nations, and usher in a new era of peace and holiness. I'm expecting big things from you, Jesus" (Matt Skinner, workingpreacher.org)! "This is one of those moments in Scripture that highlights the vast distance between us and God. Though Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. We would like a savior who is a winner, and one who makes us winners, but Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers" (Elisabeth Johnson, WP). I'm sure suffering, rejection and being killed wasn't on Peter's card for his Messiah! "We signed on for a crown, not a cross, Jesus!" "Good thing Peter is there to straighten Jesus out and show him the path 'the Christ' is supposed to follow (Skinner). Peter gets the title right but the meaning wrong. "God's people have always been tempted to be like the rest of the nations. It was true back then, and it's true now. There's a pretty consistent pattern in scripture of what that looks like: I want to be in power, I want to have influence, I want to be prosperous, I want to have security. And even if God gives me some of those things, I'll try to achieve even more through worldly means" (Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, The Power, and The Glory*). Side note: For much of American history, white Christians had all of those things. Given that reality and America's rise to superpower status over the last 250 years, it's easy to see why and how some Christians believe that our country is "the city on the hill" in scripture; divinely blessed. "The problem is, blessings

often become indistinguishable from entitlements. At its root, we're talking about idolatry. A huge temptation is that Christian nationalism often elevates national identity above Christian identity. When patriotism becomes intertwined with worship, critics argue it can: justify national sins, excuse injustice, or simply that God favors one nation over others. The First Commandment warns against giving ultimate allegiance to anything other than God. I read of a pastor who had a parishioner tell him that his family was leaving that church after worshiping there for decades because the pastor was not interpreting the Bible in light of the Constitution. Are your politics informing your faith or is your faith informing your politics? Hear the difference?

After Peter rebukes Jesus, Jesus then rebukes Peter saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you're setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (v33b). "From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Satan was out to change Jesus' course, to turn him away from the cross- to be another kind of messiah. But it is not possible. No cross, no crown" (W. Hulitt Glover, *Feasting on the Word (FOW)*)! Peter was pursuing victory *in* the world; Jesus was promising victory *over* the world. Hear the difference? "And if Peter could be singled out as 'Satan' for putting an earthly kingdom ahead of an eternal kingdom, then we're all fair game" (Alberta). This passage asks us to also consider where our loyalties lie. Theologian Henri Nouwen says, "The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true

saints.” Want to learn who Jesus really is? Follow him. What’s the proper response to the truth that he is the Messiah, God’s anointed? Following him. What does it mean to say that Jesus is Lord and to follow him? It means to truly participate in the upside-down kingdom he proclaims. “It means to expect the same consequences he faced in life and in death” (Skinner). But “we would rather define Jesus according to our own priorities,” (Skinner) which again is exactly why Jesus calls Peter, “Satan.” Peter and all of us are filled with these temptations and more.

Baptism was and still is about identity and belonging- turning away from sin and renouncing evil. Those being baptized profess their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and promise to follow Christ, being loyal/faithful to him. The Christian declared that Caesar was not Lord, although that was one of his titles; only Jesus Christ was Lord. This shift in loyalties put many early Christians in mortal danger, and many paid the price” (Campbell and Fohr). Who do you say Jesus is? I’ll leave you with words from *Christianity Today* editor and preacher, Russell Moore. “We did not come to God by way of a National Mall stage or an Oval Office video or a remembered founding or a reclaimed country; we come to God through a torn veil by blood to a throne of grace. And we do that not through a mascot, but through a Mediator. This is not an easy gospel, but it’s the gospel we need!” Thanks be to God! Amen.