Judges 10:6-9, James 2:8-13

“Does the nation need to be under God?”

I don’t have too many storis or examples in my sermon today so I’ve decided we are going to play a game to start. I want you to guess who the celebrity is that I’m describing, but I’m only going to describe them by the amount of money that they have given to charities, and the charities that they have given to. Are you ready? 3 million to UCLA, 45,000 to the NAACP, 55,000 to the UNCF, 60,000 to the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Museum of Tolerance, 40,000 to Para Los Ninos, 40,000 to the rescue mission, a nd finally 50,000 to the Salvation Army. Anyone know? Donald Sterling. He gave away millions but that doesn’t give him a free pass to be a bigot.

James teaches us a basic fundamental lesson and the more we read it the more that lesson rings true. What we believe has to control our behavior. His giving to those charities was really a mask for what he really believed, that he was better than certain people and he used his power and his money and his influence to make that point. Now he’s an easy target to hit these days because so many people are after him.

But James points to our actions as being primary in respect to our theology. Look at Jonah who had wonderfully sound theology, he was a prophet of the Lord, but he hated people and so as a result became angry with God. The opposite would be the good Samaritan who according to the Jews had terrible theology, so much so that they couldn’t be considered as being God’s people. And yet Jesus uses him as the one who did the will of God, bad theology and all. We cannot sin lightly and think we can serve faithfully James tells us today.

And we have used these verses and we have personalized them over these past weeks. Today we find that God has given us the royal law, this law which says simply, love your neighbor. So our perfect Presbyterian theology does not excuse us from skipping this law and thinking it is just not relevant to us because we have our theology down. This royal law applies to each of us as individuals. We can love our wife and be faithful to her but if we treat our neighbors like garbage or we are addicted to alcohol or money, we don’t get a free pass we because we did one thing right or we aren’t nearly as bad as other people.

The law of love must also rule for us as a church. We have a great mission statement: “Knowing Christ, growing in Christ, going with Christ.” Our theology is sound, but if we don’t love the community, and go out of our way, each of us, to welcome the visitor, God is not going to bless this church, we are not going to grow, we will become even more focused on ourselves. We have to abide and be under God in our own lives, and in our church. That all makes sense right? We’ll get to the Bible in a minute, but you have to be with me and agree with me up to now before we get to James.

So what about our nation. Does the Old Testament apply to America? God tells the Israelites to conquer and form a strong nation. What about Jesus’ teachings? Do we have to apply them to our country or is the saying true, that Jesus’ teachings were not meant for governments, but rather were teachings just for individuals. I missed that part of Scripture where it says that if you are a government you don’t have to be under God. Where does it say that? It doesn’t.

Does a nation have to be under God? Does our beloved America, of thee I sing, have to be under God, under this royal law that we can all agree should apply to individuals and to a church? Of course a nation has to be under God, and so as a result held to the same standards and responsibilities as an individual in their personal walk and a church in its communal walk.

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When I go back to the founding of our nation, I have to go back to the pilgrims who came over on the Mayflower. They came to this new land and viewed themselves as the new people of Israel and they came to establish the new Israel and they understood this land to be the promised land in the same way that the Jewish people understood Canaan to be the land flowing with milk and honey. If you read their writings so much of what they say and how they were governed reflected a theocratic approach where the Bible was their book of faith as well as their book of law and government. When enemies attacked they viewed their defenses, and very often their offense as being God willed. Our ancestors, my ancestors, understood this land as being providentially provided to them and they saw themselves, as the Israelites did, as the people of God.

How about them Israelites? We pick up in Judges 10 verse 6 and we read that the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. We read this phrase repeated dozens of times in Judges and it reflects a consistent theme in Scripture that the nation of Israel, even God’s very chosen, got it wrong more often than they got it right. We need to remember that.

Well, what did they do that was so evil as a nation? A nation who chose their leaders not in a democratic election which we had and which the Ukraine is having today. No, again, it was a theocracy where the priests, the religious folk choose who was in charge. Verse 6 tells us they abandoned God and did not worship him. As a result God became angry, Israel was defeated in battles and Israel as a result of their national sin was greatly distressed.

What does a greatly distressed nation look like? Dust bowl and depression, 9-11, Syria etc. In my lifetime I have not seen the extent of distress where our country is being invaded or is at war on our land. Our veterans have seen countries and people torn apart and understand what it means to be distressed, often being distressed translated into an entire lifetime of trying to forget why we celebrate memorial day when their comrades were taken down. In Naples, still today, buildings that were hit by Allied bombing when Italy was liberated remain standing.

The battles that have been fought by those who gave their lives has allowed my generation, and those to come, most of us, to not experience the type of distress that Israel suffered. The celebration of Memorial Day is the fact that due to the ultimate sacrifice we can have a parade tomorrow.

I wonder if when you saw my sermon title you were worried that I was going to go a different direction than asserting that of course we have to be a nation under God. I admit, it is a bit of a provocative title for Memorial Day. But it has to be because our men and women did not die so that we could shirk our responsibilities that are laid out in James for our nation.

So what has James taught us so far? Just recently, three weeks ago we learned that if we are not able to control our tongue, if we talk freely about other people in a negative way, then our faith is useless. Last week we learned that if we are partial to some people over others then we probably don’t believe in Jesus as our Savior. This week, starting in vs. 8 we are told that our faith, what we believe is fulfilled, or in the Greek, it is made perfect by the royal law. And then, this is why I love James, it is so simple, because we don’t have to figure out what the royal law is, he tells us. Who wants to read the royal law? “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Why is it called royal? Because Jesus took Leviticus 19:18, and turned it into the bookend of all the law as he tells us in Matthew 22:39-40. All the law hangs on that. And then in John 13:34 we have Jesus giving his Mandatum Novum, you should love one another as I have loved you. Lay down your lives for your country and you fulfill that law. The greatest sacrifice.

So being under God means what for us, truly being under God means loving your neighbor. What does being under God look like for a country? Let me read you a verse that applies to us today: I Peter 2:9-10. America, do you believe this? Are we God’s own people? If so, then we had better be under God. I have traveled and been to over 40 countries and no other country that I have been to do you find more people who say they love God, more people who go to church than you do here in the US. You find more Americans than any other nationality heading up charitable organizations. We live in a great nation and we as a nation do great things all over the world. This is true, no ifs, and, or butts.

Do we love our neighbors, though, as a country? You know democracy is not a divinely inspired doctrine. There is no place in Scripture that mandates it for any country. Not all nations should have a democratically elected government. When we feel that our neighbors have to be like us, and they have to be like us by force by trying to bring about springtime in countries, we aren’t loving our neighbors.

When we close our borders to our literal neighbors out of fear and economic necessity, I’m not real sure we are following the royal law. I’m not espousing policy, I’m just trying to figure out if we are supposed to be under God or not. And if we are then we had better make our policies reflect that we are. Maybe the NT is only meant for individuals so we can have better quiet times and understand what Predestination means rather than try to apply it to a clunky old political bureaucracy.

We can all agree that we have to be under God as individuals. Love has to rule. The same is true for us as a unified body, a church. The passing of the peace is a party, and I love that. We love each other. As a nation we can’t be afraid to follow the royal law and be under God for that law was set by our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our only king, and the one whom we must serve and adore. Amen.