

The Margaret Parker Lecture
Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles Annual Meeting of Convention
November 8, 2025

Canon Jeffrey R. Baker, Vice-Chancellor

The Church of Dissent in the Imperial Republic
(prepared manuscript)

The Lord be with you!

The invitation to give the Parker Lecture is a great honor, and it has been a gift and blessing to be back among you.

For more than a decade, this diocese was our spiritual home, a refuge, our church, and it's where the Episcopal Church caught my family when we needed it most.

This summer, my family and I moved back home to Alabama for our next long chapter, but this diocese and its people will always be with us.

I have served here as a vice-chancellor for seven years, merging my vocation and profession in ways I never expected.

I thank Bishop John and Canon Melissa and you all for your trust in me to counsel and advise this diocese. (And run back and forth across the convention hall feigning a posture of calm composure during multiple rounds of voting.....)

But at this hour, I address you in a different role for this Parker Lecture. Right now, I'm not your lawyer, but I have a charge to consider how the church should be witness and light in an era of creeping nationalism, massive wealth disparities, revanchist authoritarianism, emboldened white supremacy, anti-immigrant bias, and needless and brutal war.

I will take a long and broad view of our life as a church and in the life of the nation.

A couple of caveats:

First, I am not going to say anything original or novel today. Ecclesiastes is true. There is nothing new under the sun. We are not facing anything right now that we have not faced before, and let that be a source of hope, courage, and joy. We're in a storm, but the storm will spend

itself before the light goes out. There will be pain, injustice, and real loss, but we are scrappy people of the incarnation and the resurrection.

Second, I'm not a credentialed theologian or historian. I am just a lawyer and law professor, but we don't often hold ourselves back from encroaching into other fields.

We are prone to overconfidence.

So I approach this question today: How should our church - The Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, (maybe even the Diocese of Alabama) and the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church - project its values, faith, and witness into our times? How do we shine a gospel light into rising darkness in our world?

We can't begin to answer unless we know where we want to go. So what are our goals and objectives in this moment we have inherited and own right now in the United States?

They are what they always are - to love God, to love our neighbors, to bring forth justice - however flawed and imperfect we will be - and a beloved community approaching the Kingdom of God.

Let's hold onto this reminder: whenever Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God, it was always a surprise. His vision of the Kingdom of God is subversive, counter-intuitive, and rooted in a holy economy that does not resemble ours. It certainly does not resemble unbridled, metastasizing capitalism and oligarchy. It certainly does not resemble a heedless government that depends on violent coercion to advance its policies.

So as we move forward, we should not be distracted by the trappings of the Empire or this Imperial Republic. Let's keep our eyes on an upside-down Kingdom where the last shall be first and the least shall be the greatest.

Often in the gospels, we read about "teachers of the law" confronting Jesus with questions. As a teacher of the law myself, I am profoundly alarmed about this, because they're often prone to overconfidence. And it usually doesn't go well for them.

For example: Matthew 22:

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second

is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Sometimes in these situations, Jesus answers with a question, a parable, or some other inquiry that flips the assumptions, but here he answers the question directly. And this is the bedrock foundation for every political, economic, theologic, legal, diplomatic, or policy question we will ever face:

All the law and the prophets hang on two propositions, to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And those two commandments are alike. They are never in conflict - if we or anyone ever finds ourselves saying that our love for God justifies hatred or violence to our neighbors, we have lost our way.

As Dr. Martin Luther King said, this is not some “emotional bosh.” It’s not a cross-stitch pillow or a repeated chorus in a cute praise song.

This is the absolute and radical organizing principle. It is the measure against which we judge everything else.

In I Corinthians, Paul underscores the thesis:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Or maybe - If we have pristine politics and a majority in Congress, but have not love, we are nothing.

Let’s look at this practically. How does this actually work in the real world of law, policy, politics, and self-government under the Constitution in this Republic.

Every law, policy, judgment, and election is a choice, and we choose - with our values and imagination - how we will live together. So we must think hard about how we will choose, what we value, the world we can imagine.

Jesus gives us a practical, radical, disruptive means of putting this to work in the Sermon on the Mount: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

This is the Golden Rule, the gospel's categorical imperative. Some may ask whether it applies to the law as real law, instead of mere personal piety, but that is no real distinction. Jesus meant the law in the real world when he preached love. It is the indispensable heart of justice, and it is the lodestar, immutable call for the church.

This is not passing advice from the teacher, not just a devotional life lesson. This is the fundamental rule, and it harks to the very creation.

In Genesis, as God creates humanity, God renders them all in God's image. "Let us make them in our image, after our likeness." This is the *imago dei*, the fundamental, inextinguishable divine spark in every human life. This is why Jesus said the two commandments are alike - to love God and to love one's neighbors - because the neighbors bear the very image of God. To love one is to love the other. This is not negotiable. No one and no government has the right, the power, the sovereignty, to deny the image of God in any other person.

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Ben Franklin expressed it this way: "All men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." In the 18th century, that idea was literally revolutionary, but it always had been, and it always is. There is nothing new under the sun.

The organizing principle of the Kingdom of God is that we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves because they and we bear the image of God.

The organizing principle of our republic is that all people are equal and endowed with these dignities that no one can sell or ignore.

But of course, we fail. All the time.

Usually when we fail - individually, socially, or politically - we fail because of our own greed. But our greed is almost always really a manifestation of fear.

And our fear almost always comes from a sense of binary scarcity: I will only get what I can take, and if anyone else gets theirs, they must have been taking it from me. This is brutal competition in the state of nature, and this fearful greed is almost always the root of political and legal oppression. And we use it to justify a parade of horrors.

The master must oppress the slave for the master's profit but also because the master always comes to believe that if he doesn't oppress the slave, the slave will oppress him in return.

This fear is the logic of the colonizer. The extractive colonizer says, if I want this land and its resources, I must oppress these indigenous people, because I cannot imagine that they would share and not resist me with violence, so I must use violence to protect myself from the imagined threat of the people I aim to exploit.

This fear is the logic of white supremacy, its inability to imagine humanity without a hierarchy. White supremacists tell themselves they must be superior because of a deeply rooted fear that if they are not, they must be inferior. It is impossible for them to even consider that all humanity bears the image of God because it makes them terribly afraid of losing what they've got - or think they've got. White supremacists are grasping cowards who shudder at the idea of sharing or losing. They're the twitching corpse of the Confederacy who would have rather burned down the world than admit to the full humanity of Black people.

This fear is the logic of the fascist. The fascist believes he must rule with violence and intimidation and flatten culture into his preferred vision, because if he doesn't, everyone who is different from him will diminish and erase him and his. The fascist, too, is ultimately a terrified, quaking coward who does not dare to relinquish violence and intimidation, because he cannot imagine a world that would not use those same tools against them.

Fear is the world-view of the authoritarian who panics at the very thought of fully dignified, loving people defending the image of God in the people, in every person.

Fear drags everyone along, especially fear of losing a livelihood or power in the systems we serve. One of my favorite Southern musicians and poets, Lee Bains, puts it this way:

*Hear the poets and professors
Postulate how we all got so robbed.
All it takes is one wicked heart, a pile of money,
And a chain of folks just doing their jobs.*

Of course, this world view is not the bright and humane Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims - the revolutionary economy where the last shall be first. Where blessings flow to the meek, the peacemakers, the poor, the despised. Jesus gives a vision of a kingdom that liberates the widows, the orphans, the sick, the hungry, the prisoner.

And for some reason, it's always a surprise.

Later in Matthew 25, Jesus responds to even more teachers of the law with the well-known stories about sheep and goats. Those self-righteous folks who worshipped publicly and devoted themselves to the law are alarmed to find they are the goats sent away because they did not feed

the hungry, visit the prisoner, and welcome the stranger. They were loud and devout but useless. The people who did take up the cause of the disenfranchised, the hungry, the cold, they were the sheep rewarded with life with Christ. Because to tend to those people is to tend to God - because they bear God's image.

But even so, how does all this translate from personal morality to our common life and government under law. How does this manifest in our public life in our politics?

Paul wrote something difficult to the church in Rome on this question, and many people misunderstand this passage in Romans 13. Many abuse it.

Paul wrote:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct but to bad.

People in power love this passage, because they can use it as a hammer against dissent. And it's a hard passage when we witness true atrocities across history from "governing authorities" who are not a "terror to the bad" but manifestly terrorize the weak, vulnerable, and good.

But in our United States, we have something different than Rome or other absolutist regimes. We are not just the government and the governed, the sovereign and the subject, the state and citizen. We are both!

At the same time, in this democratic, Constitutional republic, we are both the people who are the sovereign, the governed and the government, the citizen and the state. We vote, speak, give, serve, lead, and have ultimate responsibility for our government. Our government is accountable to us, the people. We the People are the ordained authorities with the godly burden of justice.

So we should keep reading. Paul continues his short discourse on the law:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments . . . are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Thus, we have a responsibility not only to live personal lives of virtue that recognize the dignity of our neighbors. In our republic, we have a duty to pass laws and sustain a government that

recognizes the image of God in every neighbor - and not just citizens who share our status. Every single person, without exception.

And Jesus says that we have a special obligation to the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the prisoner, the stranger in the land.

But for many American Christians, there is a knee-jerk tendency to say, “Yes, we should care for the poor, but it’s not the government’s job. We can’t force people to be generous. Welfare ruins people. And if the government does it, the church won’t.”

But that’s a problematic position, limiting the government from charity and justice for the poor, but being completely comfortable with arming a government with the lethal power to coerce other behaviors, to accept brutal responses to crime and mass incarceration, to bless warmaking and concentration camps. The same people who decry taxes for education, food, shelter, and medicine often are pleased to use the law and our money to control and coerce other folks’ morality, private lives, and families.

It’s a curious position to say that we all owe a duty of charity and hospitality but to deprive our representative government of tools to address hunger, housing, and healthcare.

Whether we are voter or lawmaker, advocate or judge, we should use every tool at our disposal to seek justice and inclusion: the government, the church, the market, civil society, neighborhoods, and everything else. We can imagine love in public policy, then make it so.

If the government answers to us, then a government that chooses vengeance over mercy reflects poorly on its people. To whom would Jesus be cruel? No one. Whom would he denigrate and subjugate? No one. A government that chooses cruelty over compassion will never be Christian.

Abraham Lincoln understood this when he applied the Golden Rule to public policy. He wrote, perhaps apocryphally, “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.”

Meaning, also, no one should be a master, because no one should be a slave.

So we should continue this thought, applying the Golden Rule to our times:

As I would be free, so I would not seek dominion over other people.

As I would not be abandoned and alone, so I should draw near in proximity to those in need.

As I would speak freely, so I would not silence others.

As I would claim and enjoy civil and human rights, so I must protect the civil and human rights of all people.

As I would not be persecuted, excluded, vilified, killed, and slandered for my faith, so I must honor, respect, and welcome people of all faiths.

As I would not die for want of medicine, food, or money, so I would not watch another suffer for lack of care and sustenance.

As I would not be incarcerated because of my race, trauma, or poverty, so I would not imprison others because of theirs.

As I would seek sanctuary for my family, so I would welcome those who walk across a desert for theirs.

As I would not be murdered in international waters in peacetime without any legal authority or probable cause, so I should not absolve my government when it commits these crimes in my name.

As I would enjoy access in keeping with all my abilities, so I would advance universal access for all.

As I would be paid a fair wage for work in a safe and dignified job, so I must treat workers justly and honor their labor and lives.

As I would live in a safe home, so I would not leave anyone on the street.

As I would educate my children, so I would invest in schools in every community.

As I would enjoy life on this beautiful planet, so I should conserve it for others.

As I would vote, so I would not deny other's franchise.

As I would not be enslaved, lynched, robbed, disenfranchised, boarded into a ghetto or concentration camp, driven from my native land, or ripped from my family, so I would disavow, denounce, renounce, condemn, and root out racism that has driven all these sins.

As I would not be abducted off the street by masked government agents without due process, so I would not vote for a politician who would order it.

If I would not live under a fascist regime, so I must be anti-fascist.

The litany is endless. We must put all things to the test of love and the relentless Golden Rule.

This is the revolutionary, subversive, rebellious adventure to center love above all other fears and greed. Love topples tyrants who traffic in suspicion, lies, and violence.

For so long as we have votes, voices, influence, money, and any power at all, we have a Christian obligation to use them to advance love, truth, justice, compassion, restoration, redemption, and care for the poor, outcast, vulnerable, and hungry.

Then, even then, we have to love our enemies, dignify them, and wish for them all the fruits of love and justice and redemption as we seek for ourselves and our neighbors.

So those are the principles, the first things, the call of the gospel to our public life.

Now as a church, we have some choices before us to advance the Kingdom of God that will honor the dignity of all human beings, to advance laws and policies that align with love.

There are many ways to describe our choices and approaches, but today I suggest the church has three paths: The Church of Empire. The Church in Exile. The Church of Dissent.

The Church of Empire

The Church of the Empire is the church that aligns itself with or permits itself to be captive to the state. This is Herod being a vassal to Rome. It is the Church of England that accompanied the Crown around the world to colonize and convert. It is the Catholic Church that blessed a royal conquest and destruction of people around the world. It is the church of the Crusades.

It's easy to judge them from our modern perch, but we must also admit the temptation. It's so tempting that the Devil took his chance to take Jesus to the top of the Temple and say, All this can be yours! The temptation to this temporal, political, and military power is potent, even with the best of intentions.

Why shouldn't we use the tools of state power to advance the kingdom of God? Didn't I just say we should vote for public policies that advance our values? Isn't everyone doing it? If we don't take power, someone else will.

But here's the problem. Inevitably, without fail, when the church seeks to use or permits itself to be used by the state, the result is always corruption, always violence, always a stripping of a

liberating gospel in favor of coercive police force. The church that should preach love always ends up burning heretics, hanging free women, torturing dissenters, waging war in the name of the name of the Cross. Always.

Even so, the temptation is alive today. We see it in Russia where Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church have chosen to use the church itself to justify and propagate war. The Christian Nationalist movement in our own nation is attempting to become the church of the Empire. It seeks to capture the state for its own religious ends, to impose, coerce, and dominate the moral, spiritual, political life of the nation, to use the tools of the state to advance its ambitions - to control how people live and to favor their own. But make no mistake, where they succeed, the result will be the same, in modern trappings - violence, subjugation, and war. Nothing like love.

But even we who oppose them face the same temptation - to seize the power of the state so that they cannot have it. But that is just the same binary fear of scarcity and short imagination that always swings us between religious wars and political oppression. Jesus refused the offer. So we must transcend it.

The Church of Exile

The next option is to choose the path of exile. The Church of Exile happens in two ways. The first is when the state or a dominant culture literally, violently drives the church underground. Consider the Romans worshipping in catacombs, enslaved Americans praying the woods because their masters would not let them read, segregated black churches establishing themselves when white supremacists churches (like our own Episcopal forebears) excluded them, or Christians now around the world worshipping in secret from the regimes that govern them. That's not a temptation. That's reality, but it's not our reality today.

But sometimes, churches choose self-exile. And it's tempting. When everything is going wrong, when times seem hopeless, when the powers are arrayed against us, when the struggle is real, it can feel right to check out, to hide in the desert. We may feel compelled to retreat into ethereal spirituality, and spend all our time, energy, and resources on things above, not things below. It can be easier, and it can seem holier. Then it begins to feel self-righteous, judgmental, and tribal.

For sure, we must never neglect prayer, study, and worship in holy and safe places; we must nourish ourselves and our people. We may even have to shake the sand from our sandals at the city gate from time to time. But we should not retreat and abandon the world, so long as we still have a choice and capacity, wealth and power to stay present with our neighbors.

The Church of Dissent

So this leads us to our holy calling as a church of dissent in the empire. If we should not seize power and control of government or surrender to it, and if we should not retreat in exile, what good can we be?

We can live, preach, prophesy, and bear witness to the Kingdom of God and the fierce urgency of love. Then, even without seizing political power, maybe especially when we don't have power, we heap burning coals on the heads of the tyrants who oppress and profit from injustice. The witness of love will shame and terrify them.

When a brave preacher implores the government to be merciful in the house of God, it will confuse and dismay the powers that know nothing but greed and fear.

Watch this lesson from Acts 17:

Paul, Silas, and their band came into Thessalonica and started preaching and engaging with the people. Some Jewish people joined them, “as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.” This was a threat to the established order. The local religious and political leaders organized a mob “with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces” to drive them out.

When they could not find them, the leaders arrested their friend, Jason, and haled him into court. They said: “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.”

This was not a mere religious dispute; framing it as a legal challenge to the emperor was a strategic pretext to prop up the status quo. The radical inclusion of all people in their Christian communities subverted the prevailing powers and profit centers. These young communities were outcasts who embraced everyone, especially other outcasts. In Galatians, Paul said that there is no Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free. Elsewhere in Acts we see that these communities had all their property in common. They distributed their communal wealth to feed the poor.

The young church leveled hierarchies among the enslaved and the free, men and women of all races, the influential and the disenfranchised. Their love and inclusion, their radical hospitality turned the world upside down.

Even without dramatic rebellion, their very existence challenged the core assumptions of the empire and its economies.

The public witness for love and the full dignity of our neighbors emboldens those who feel alone or afraid. The public witness for justice provides cover for those who are wary to speak out among louder, angry voices.

But we're not just limited to living virtuously and preaching for justice. There are moments when we rise to fight, to take direct action against unjust, oppressive power in the defense of the poor, vulnerable, and the shackled.

But when we fight, we must only ever fight with love for the oppressed and resist hatred for the enemy. When we protest, demonstrate, organize, vote, and even argue online, we must do it with love.

We see this model when Jesus enters the Temple and drives out the money-lenders and the profiteers who inserted themselves between the people and their God.

Jesus was furious, even violent, and if we assume he is acting in love, we must reckon with this anger and its object. For whom is he fighting? The money-changers and the sellers combined to exploit the poor who came to worship, standing astride their way to the Temple, extracting profit from their devotion, blocking their access to liberation. The objects of Jesus' love are the people coming to worship and suffering in a market that bled their meager wealth. He is outraged at the game and the players who denied them their full dignity before God.

He was not personally offended; he didn't need to save God. He would endure insults to himself beyond imagination. Rather, he rises to fight when he sees insiders erecting checkpoints to block outsiders and bleed profit from their poverty. Jesus' anger is for those who coerce, exploit and exclude. His love is for the abused, exploited, and excluded. He rallies for them, and his subversive disruption provokes violent reaction from the powers he threatens.

So sang his mother Mary, striking this prophetic note in her Magnificat:

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

If we follow Christ, we must listen to those from below. We must walk with the people in sacred resistance to hatred, fear, greed, segregation, and exclusion - until justice rolls down like waters.

Love like this frightens entrenched powers. As Bishop Oscar Romero preached, “A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is proclaimed – what gospel is that?”

The price may be high. Father Romero himself died as a martyr at the altar. John the Baptist spoke truth to power, calling out hypocrisy and corruption in the regime, and he lost his head for it.

In our own history, this kind of brave, angry action brings to mind Christian Abolitionists who opposed slavery in the Americas from the 1600s. They were here always, faithfully protesting and opposing chattel slavery, and their movement grew throughout the 1800s. That movement grew in its moral convictions and clarity, even establishing the illegal Underground Railroad, until the nation elected an abolitionist, President Lincoln. But as the ascendance of the moral position advanced, so did the reactionary, revanchist power of slaveholders until it brought us to war.

But consider the faithful courage of those Christians abolitionists and the enslaved and free Black people who opposed slavery in faith for generations before they would ever see Emancipation. They carried a light for liberty merely in the righteous hope that their grandchildren would see freedom.

And consider the suffragists, women of faith and valor, who insisted on the promises of the Declaration. They believed that they bore the image of God and that all were equal in Christ and under the Constitution. They began organizing in earnest in the 1840s, nearly 80 years before white women secured the right to vote under the 19th Amendment, nearly 120 years before Black women secured the right to vote in 1965. (A decade before this church would ordain women, the Philadelphia 11 whom we celebrated last year.)

Consider that cloud of witnesses - of faithful, loyal dissenters - who labored to bring justice to the nation, calling it to its own highest principles.

Consider the Black Christians who organized in a church basement in Montgomery to boycott city buses after Rosa Parks was arrested in 1954.

Consider the Catholic farm workers who rose for justice and humanity in their work, led by, among others, Dolores Huerta who gave this address a few years ago.

Consider the long, then quick, march for justice for gay, trans, and queer people, in our church and in the nation, and their witness of dignity and humanity in the face of blind and cruel ignorance that continues to this day.

Consider all these people who labored, spoke and dissented from the majority, from the dominant culture, from the powers and principalities, for generations before they would ever see the dawn of their righteous causes.

If we are going to stand with anyone, let's stand with them.

Reinhold Niebuhr said, "The fight for justice in society will always be a fight." He was a realist and knew that we would always struggle with our tendencies toward selfishness and fear and that our broken institutions will always seek to defend and sustain themselves at all costs.

Is dissenting in love enough? It may not be as satisfying as a crusade of domination, but love is only ever the way to justice. Nothing else works. This is not naive or weak or foolish. It requires great wisdom, courage, and strength to insist on love.

As my 20 year old daughter, Betsy Baker said this week, "Hope has so much more energy and longevity than playing cynical defense forever."

This is how change comes to culture, the law, and government - the steady, creative, intentional application of love in public to test and challenge injustice. We must be witnesses and examples of how love works, what love requires. We must hold our government and our communities accountable to love and the dignity of all people - in pulpits, in ballot boxes, on the streets, in our families, jobs, lives, and among the people.

We must be troublemakers who shake the foundations of the empire by challenging its core assumptions.

As we acknowledge the uncertain paths, we must gird for a long slog and the hard work of prophetic witness and embrace. Love must be the test against which we measure every vote, law, policy, party, and politician. Love must be the test for every post, vote, donation, and march. Love must be the test of every sermon, prayer, program, and parish. Love must be the test of every relationship, friendship, conflict and contest.

Inevitably, we will disagree on the means of love. The more complicated the problem, the more complex the issues, the more difficult it will be to design effective policy. But we do this all the time: If profit is the principle, policy will reflect it. If securing party power is the policy, the law may achieve it. If vengeance or cruelty are the policy, the government can make it happen.

So when love is the objective, the fundamental principle, the options will become clear. If we must choose between prisons and schools, we will choose schools. If we are to choose houses and food for the poor or tax breaks for the rich, we'll choose the houses and the food. If we must choose between basic healthcare or shareholder profits, we will choose access to care for our neighbors.

But we really don't have to choose between these binaries. These are just matters of imagination and creativity. Love does not prescribe any political or economic system; it does not favor any party. We must put them all to the test of love. If they pass, we should defend them. If they fail, we must change them.

When there is an intractable tie between competing interests. We must favor the poor, the hungry, homeless, and exiled. Jesus calls us to be a witness for and allies alongside the vulnerable and the outcasts. He made this clear when teaching about the Rich Young Ruler, the parable of Lazarus, camels going through the eyes of needles, and his discourse on sheep and goats.

Our mission is not to make the United States be a Christian nation under our sway. Rather, our mission is to seek justice in the nation, to call it to its own revolutionary ideals. Sometimes we will witness great strides and success. Sometimes we will watch in dismay as the empire backslides into fear, greed, and segregation.

In dark days of lawlessness, corruption, and violence, our job is to carry a light through the darkness as an indictment of the darkness - to take our shift on the line, to receive it from those in the cloud of witnesses who came before us, to join them, and then hand it on to the children who come after us.

Our work, our calling and vocation, in private and public life, is to love our neighbors so that we are loving God, and to shine like stars in the darkness, as beacons of justice and love and beloved community, to bring shame - then redemption - to those who bring fear and hatred, and to give life to everyone else.

Amen.

Thanks be to God.