



**ALL SAINTS CHURCH**  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**Neighbor Love Is Never Neutral**

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.  
Homecoming Sunday - September 17, 2006

I want to begin this sermon by once again expressing my gratitude to the Internal Revenue Service. Those brothers and sisters really know how to shine a spotlight on a struggling church and swell the numbers of worshipers. I will try to explain briefly what is going on between the IRS and All Saints in just a moment.

But first I want to welcome those of you who have come as visitors to All Saints this morning. This Sunday is Homecoming Sunday, the annual celebration in which we kick off the new program year. We often have a bit of a summer diaspora here at All Saints. This is the Sunday when all hands are back on deck, ready, rested, and raring to go to celebrate a new year of transformation. We believe in transformation here – the transformation of those who worship together in order for each of us in turn to do our part to transform the world to be more like that dream God has for creation. A world that has not yet been but can be and will be if we will dedicate our energies to it. A world of healing, love, and justice for all, a world of peace among peoples and nations, and a world where every human being is fully alive without bigotry, violence, injustice, oppression, terrorism, war or torture.

Homecoming Sunday notes the reality that the more each of us is rooted in a community where we feel at home, the more joyful energy we have available for this journey of transformation of self, church, and world. As Anne Peterson's Homecoming poem reads, "If home is where the heart is – Some safe, comfortable place Where one is loved as-is, without condition – Then you are home."

So, my friends, members of long-standing, members who have just come, and those of you who are sniffing us out this morning for whatever reason, welcome. We have come together, come home today, to recommit ourselves to another year of worship that moves the heart and challenges the mind, another year of working for compassion, healing, inclusion, justice, and peace AND to have hearts full of joy while we're at it.

Now, a word about our relationship with the IRS: If you need background information about the IRS investigation of All Saints, let me ask that you go to our website to download relevant historic documents, including a copy of the sermon that our Rector Emeritus, George Regas, preached prior to the presidential election in 2004. You can also find copies of the two summonses served on me Friday.

The more recent events calling for our prayerful attention this morning include the fact that this past July we heard from the IRS for the first time in 8 months. They had not answered either our written or oral communications to them since November of last year. The July 2006 letter requested a lengthy list of documents from us, including every instance

in which we mention any elected official or candidate in our worship. Since we pray for President Bush by name Sunday by Sunday and because of the breadth of the other IRS questions, we noted that the volume of paper required to respond would be both overwhelming and irrelevant to the examination.

So in August we asked that all the IRS' requests be reformulated with appropriate specificity. For those reasons and others, including the fact that All Saints wants to preserve our right to challenge the government's procedures in the case, we respectfully requested that their demands be reissued in the form of an administrative summons. We heard nothing from them until this past Thursday afternoon when they called asking me to be available Friday to receive the service of two summonses by an IRS agent.

My senior warden, Bob Long, came over Friday morning. The IRS agent arrived soon thereafter. I received the summonses – one calls for a lengthy list of documents, the other requires my appearance at an IRS hearing next month. After the very kind IRS agent exited, wishing us good luck, Bob and I then analyzed the list of requests for documents and discussed our options with our attorneys by phone.

During this next week, we will decide which course of action we will now take. One option is to present the documents and myself for testimony as the summonses dictate. On the other hand we may choose respectfully to inform the IRS that we intend not to comply with these summonses. It would then be up to the IRS to decide to take this matter into the U.S. Judicial system for a hearing and ruling on whether or not the courts would enforce the summonses. A courtroom would provide a venue in the halls of justice for us to make our argument. Our argument is that there is no objective basis for the IRS to have a reasonable belief that we have in deed participated in campaign intervention. Furthermore we would argue that this entire case has been an intrusion, in fact an attack upon this Church's first amendment rights to the exercise of freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

I would be happy to receive your thoughts about our upcoming decision by email or letter. And I will keep you informed of all the legal proceedings.

With those legal details noted I want now to address what I see at stake in our religious and political lives as a result of this latest IRS action. The current administration of the IRS apparently thinks that religious organizations should stay neutral when political issues are concerned. What that thinking totally misses is that we do not have a choice about whether or not to be neutral in the face of dehumanization, injustice, and violence. Our faith mandates that always (stopping short of endorsing or opposing political candidates) the Church can neither be silent nor indifferent when there are public policies causing detriment to the least of these.

History is shamefully littered with the moral bankruptcy of people who were Christian in name but not behavior—who were silent or indifferent or neutral in the face of

dehumanizing and destructive public policies. We remember Christians who would own slaves, expecting them to have the Sunday meal prepared when they returned from church. We remember Christians who would go to Easter services not far from death camps, brushing the ashes off their Easter finery to enter churches where their pulpits were silent in the face of the Holocaust. Neutrality and silence in the face of oppression always aids the oppressors.

Neutrality, silence and indifference are not an option for us. We must express our conscience in word and in deed or we will lose our soul in addition to losing our way. If the IRS is successful in chilling the voices in American pulpits and houses of worship, religion in America will lose all relevance and moral authority and offer nothing but impotence in the face of this war of aggression in Iraq, the genocide in Darfur, the explosive growth of terrorism, the violence of occupations in Palestine and Iraq, the global AIDS pandemic, the death of one child every three seconds in the world due to disease and poverty, torture in secret detainee camps, the shredding of the Geneva Conventions, bigotry based on race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, underfunded public education, and the growth in poverty. Every human life is sacred: Iraqi, Iranian, Palestinian, Sudanese, North Korea, Israeli, Lebanese, and American and American pulpits must not cower from speaking truth to power, including any and every expression of imperial American exceptionalism that through policy and practice values American life above other life. *All life is sacred to God.*

For pulpits in the USA to become even more neutral than they already are will make religion even more of a problem than it is already. Jesus proclaimed that religion too frequently is not a part of the solution. Too often religion is not only a part of the problem—it is the problem. Jesus said that religious institutions can become like salt that has lost its flavor. Its only good then is to be thrown away. The book of Revelation (chapter 3) speaks of the Church of Laodicea that had become so bland, so ineffectual, so callous to human suffering, so cowering before the saber-rattling of the empire of the day, so lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, that God said, “I will spew you out of my mouth.” That is exactly what happens to churches and other faith communities that do not stand up, speak up, and act up when human beings are not treated with the dignity and honor due those who bear the image of God. The fundamental commandment that pulsates at the core of our being is a three-fold love: To love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Love of neighbor is never neutral.

I have known a lot of faith communities who think religion consists only of beautiful worship, saying one’s prayers, all the while hermetically sealed in, ignoring those forces which are destroying the least of these. All Saints will always invest great resources in movingly beautiful worship. That is often how the heart is opened and moved. At the same time we will never ask someone to check their conscience or their courage at the door. We stand in the prophetic tradition where movingly beautiful worship is valuable only to the degree that it heals the human heart and then empowers the people to daring action on behalf of the oppressed.

In our lesson from the Hebrew scriptures this morning, (Isa. 50: 4-9a), the prophet says, “God wakens me every morning, wakens my ear to listen like a student.” Listen to God speaking through the prophet Isaiah (1: 14-17) , speaking to us, the students of God:

- 14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts  
my soul hates.  
They have become a burden to me;  
I am weary of bearing them.
- 15 When you spread out your hands in prayer,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even if you offer many prayers,  
I will not listen.  
Because your hands are full of blood;
- 16 wash and make yourselves clean.  
Take your evil deeds  
out of my sight!  
Stop doing wrong,
- 17 learn to do right!  
Seek justice,  
encourage the oppressed.  
Defend the cause of those without parents,  
plead the case of those who are widowed.

Listen to the prophet Amos when he speaks for God (Amos 5: 21, 23-24)

- "I hate, I despise your religious feasts;  
I cannot stand your assemblies.
- 23 Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
- 24 But let justice roll down like a river,  
and righteousness like a never-failing stream!

That is the prophetic tradition that tells us that we have no choice about the matters of justice. When Jesus preached his inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, the reading from which he preached was from the prophets – Isaiah 61 to be exact. This shows that of all the traditions and theologies in Hebrew scripture, Jesus was grounding his ministry in the prophets and their tradition. Here is the account.

Luke 4: 14-21

Jesus stood up to read. 17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Psalm 15 has been summarized by some scholars as saying this, "Those who do justice dwell in the presence of the Lord."

My friends, there is something about a moral argument that clarifies the mind about why we do what we do. And I have never felt more energized and joyful than I do this morning about expressing with passion what is at stake in this argument we have with the IRS. And my heart is filled with hope that there are millions of Americans who are standing with us and will stand with us in the claim that loving your neighbor as yourself has no place for neutrality and silence in the face of anything that demeans another human being.

Whenever I am tempted to despair, tempted to think I am in this work alone, I think of the following quotation from Robert F. Kennedy. It both gives me hope and shows me how justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man/woman stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he/she sends forth a tiny ripple of hope; and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.... I believe that ... those with the courage to enter the moral conflict will find themselves with companions in every corner of the world."

Kennedy, Robert F., quoted in *Make Gentle the Life of this World: The Vision of Robert F. Kennedy*, ed by Maxwell Taylor Kennedy, p. 133

Welcome home, my friends. Happy Homecoming. Let us never forget that our true home is the heart of God where each of us is loved just as we are and each of us is given this beautiful, energizing, audacious gift to resist any efforts to dehumanize others or to block God's dream of turning the human race into the human family.

Amen.