

As I have said explicitly, before I became a Presbyterian, I basically ignored the season of Lent until it arrives at Maundy Thursday, but, especially once I ceased being a real person and became a pastor, I have tried to observe it as a special time of our church as well as the Church year.

Two weeks ago, I read one of the standard Lent-opening Gospel passages — and indeed, part of the model for Lent because of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, — the story of Jesus' temptation by, the term the writer of Luke uses, the "Devil." And as I noted then, as the writers of Luke and Matthew present him to us, the Devil is good at quoting Scripture.

How depressingly true: *the Devil is good at quoting Scripture.*

You probably heard that this week — I believe it was Friday Russian time — Vladimir Putin quoted or paraphrased from the Gospel of John in describing how Russian soldiers would die for one another, "Greater love has no man than this, that he would lay down his life for his friend." That is an even greater abuse of Scripture than anything of which the two Gospel versions have the devil guilty.

But an interesting part of Putin's grasping of power in Russia has been the way in which he recognized that the godlessness idea of Communism was not consistent with Russian history and tradition — indeed, in one aspect about Ukraine he is correct as I recall and checked my Russian history: the Russian Orthodox Church began in Kyiv in the tenth century. Throughout Russia's subsequent history the role of the Russian Orthodox Church was hugely important until the Revolution of 1918. Indeed, forcing some reforms on that Church was one of the major challenges and at least partial successes of Peter the Great, the Tsar whom Putin, I believe, seeks to be the reincarnation. Unlike Stalin, Putin wraps himself with the support and authority of the Patriarch of the Russian Church and invokes the Church to support his maniacal quests.

Which of course could not happen in this nation nor in Canada, both of which observe (I believe, the Canadians among us must help me here) the idea that the Church and the State are two separate entities and neither should step within the proper bounds of the other. We usually term this the *separation of Church and state*.

But sometimes we go to far in what this should mean, and why in part I want to deal with this is because of two issues, one at the national or federal level, the other of very immediate relevance here, in Arizona.

For *separation of Church and state* does *not* mean that an individual person is to avoid having his or her religion influence her or his position on political issues. I do not want to go near the hot-button issue of abortion and arguments for and against over-turning *Roe v. Wade*; as a former lawyer, I fully understand how flawed the case originally used to support *Roe* was and how this makes *Roe* ripe for over-turning on strictly legal grounds, but I also understand how the legal concept of *stare decisis* — “we have already made a decision on that question, let’s not revisit it since people have relied upon it” — cuts in the direction of avoiding a reversal.

What I object to, however, is the idea that those who oppose the result of *Roe*, particularly but certainly not only, Roman Catholics, the idea that those who oppose the result of *Roe* on *religious* grounds of their attitude on abortion should somehow need to be shut-up and not allowed equal voice — or vote — with those who favor the state’s (by which I mean “government’s”) allowing abortion because their opposition is based upon religious views.

I say that because religion and religious beliefs underlie much, if not all, of what even non-religious people would call our *shared moral sense* that underlies much of our laws and customs.

Why are we against murder? Against theft? Against perjury? Forget crimes for a moment, Why do we in fact have concern about the poor and hungry? Why are we and

most western — and I could even add, *Christian* nations — *welfare states*? One can make arguments that being against those crimes is necessary for us to live in community, yet a prominent philosopher of the twentieth century, Nietzsche, argued that strong people need not be bothered with concern for the weak, that this was an undesirable result of the Judeo-Christian religions, but others — including agnostics — will acknowledge that these moral judgments are in fact the beneficial result of two thousand years of Christianity.

In other words, Christian values do indeed influence how people make and have made policy decisions in the political arena in which of necessity we all live.

And the way this works can be perverse. I will skip the fact that some certain sins were until recently crimes in some states. *Adultery* is one such example, yet the full breadth of what adultery encompasses is not even agreed among Christians, re-marriage after divorce being the example, and I won't even touch laws against homosexuality that, in England, led to the jailing of many, including the famous Irish-born playwright and *bon-vivant*, Oscar Wilde.

But it is beyond question that Christianity and the morality of Christians played a major role in ending slavery — and in the twentieth century, ending legal racial discrimination in the United States — even though, as I have pointed out in Bible study, a misreading, whether intentional or just out of laziness, for centuries led Christians to conclude that, since in Paul's letter known as Philemon he was sending an escaped slave back to his master, Paul therefore must have been saying that slavery was "OK"; as those know who have heard me preach on this very short book of the New Testament or attended our weekly Bible study three or four weeks back, while Paul could have been more straight-forward, he was telling the slave owner that he, the slave owner, should do the "right thing" — not all that subtly he was saying that the slave owner *should free* the slave.

But speaking of our weekly Bible study, as I indeed was, a proposed law here, in Arizona flies very much in the face of something we read this past week as we continue to study what to me is the singly most valuable to read for an understanding of the Old Testament itself, the book of Deuteronomy, and I am debating the best way for me to make this case in the public arena — and as a former lawyer who is now a pastor, I suspect I am fairly uniquely situated to make the argument.

The Old Testament Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy set out much of the legal procedures and practices that what we follow to this day, and reading them is eye-opening in that respect. “Thou shalt not bear false witness” was not concerned with our avoiding gossiping, but with testimony in legal disputes, civil or criminal. This past Wednesday, we ended our on-going study of Deuteronomy for the week at Deuteronomy 19:21(b), which states, “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” I trust that causes you to recall, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

But that idea is not original with Deuteronomy! It is much older than that book, and basically restates part of what is known as Hammurabi’s Code *from the twentieth century before Christ* — you undoubtedly knew that the minute I read those words, because we all encountered Hammurabi’s Code in junior high or high school, I do not remember which.

But that statement states a principle which is in many of the rules in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the principle of *proportionality*; I want to call that the *moral principle of proportionality*.

In simplest terms, we do not execute pick-pockets nor jail jay-walkers. *Proportionality* is the idea not only that the severity of punishment should not exceed the severity of the crime, but that *deadly force* should only be used to avoid death or the serious risk of death to another person.

A very specific example of proportionality in our laws is that a policeman cannot use a gun to stop a fleeing pick-pocket; a policeman can use a gun to stop a fleeing armed-robber, because that armed robber represents a danger of death or serious injury to other people.

Such *proportionality* is a well-established rule of policing — and comes from our Christian faith *via* its Jewish heritage — which got it via [Hammurabi].

(And by the way, proportionality is normally accepted in international affairs; what Putin is doing in Ukraine is a complete violation of the idea put forth by Thomas Aquinas of what “just war” would be.)

In Arizona, there is a bill before the state senate that would permit individuals in businesses to use deadly force to stop “criminal property damage” a crime that could call for as low as four months jail time, if the individual believes the person is carrying a weapon. *Carrying a weapon*, not wielding nor even having it be visible; indeed, the suspicion could be wrong. I am almost certain that if that law passes, some high schooler with a big comb in his pocket will be killed for stealing beer. The faith I proclaim, the faith I hope you hold, condemns that — and I would hope you would condemn it as well in the loudest of terms.

It is not that store keepers should be robbed. But you do not need to quote Deuteronomy to find this law against our faith. The God who makes us values each one of us; the Son of God said anyone can love those who love him, but His call is to love our enemies.

To love our enemies, not to kill them, no matter the reason for our enmity or their threat to property alone. It is time for the Church to step in and yell “Foul!” It is not a matter of “separation”; we are all involved.

Our Lord never told us to sit on the sidelines when evil was attempting to act; valuing inventory over the lives of others is evil.

Please cleanse us, O Lord, of any thoughts of evil in our own hearts, and strengthen us to combat evil when we have the tools for the task.

In Jesus' name. Amen.