

Sermon for the Swedish Lutheran Church of the Diocese of Uppsala
Uppsala Domkyrka (The Cathedral Church)
9 September 2025
The Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde

Courage and Humility in a Culture of Contempt

Jesus said ‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, ‘We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?’ Jesus said to them, ‘The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.’
John 12:27-36

God morgon! Jag är väldigt glad att vara här med er. Tusen tack även till Uppsalas ärkebiskop Martin Modéus och biskop Karin Johannesson för att dem välkomnade mig.

Never did I imagine, dear friends, that I would one day speak in this majestic Cathedral of Uppsala. I give thanks to God for my Swedish family, especially my mother, Ann Björkman Edgar, and her parents, Anna-Lisa and Åke Björkman, who always urged me to carry my Swedish heritage with pride and represent my family well in America.

I’d like to begin with the last words of the gospel passage we have before us this morning:

Vandra medan ni har ljuset , tro på ljuset medan ni har ljuset, så att ni blir ljusets söner. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you might become children of light.

Jesus’ words about believing in the light, and earlier when he spoke of walking in the light, call to mind those rare moments of clarity when we know what we need to do or to say, or when we know the next step we must take. These decisive moments evoke in us a sense of urgency, a feeling that it’s time now to act or to move, or perhaps to stay where we are but with a renewed sense of purpose.

How we feel in such moments can vary widely. We may feel excited or terrified. We may feel confident or woefully inadequate. In the end, though, our feelings aren’t nearly as important as how we choose to act in response to the clarity that has come to us as, either a gift or a burden.

There is always risk involved when taking decisive action—the risk of failure and disappointment. There might be risk to our relationships or financial security. If we venture into public life, there is the risk of ridicule or rejection. In times of conflict or societal upheaval, there is the risk of physical harm. But in the words of Marian Wright

Edelman, one of the great advocates for civil rights in the US, isn't it better to fail at something worthwhile than to succeed in mediocrity?

Believing in the light, and walking in whatever light we have received requires courage. But it also demands humility, because there is another risk to which we are always vulnerable whenever we feel compelled to speak or to act.

Perhaps you are familiar with the American cartoon characters Charlie Brown and his dog Snoopy. In one famous cartoon scene, Snoopy is sitting on top of his dog house typing on a typewriter. Charlie Brown approaches Snoopy and says, "I hear that you are writing a book on theology. I hope that you have a good title." "I have the perfect title," Snoopy replies:

Has it Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?

I don't know if your Swedish family is anything like mine, but growing up, I was surrounded by Swedes with very strong opinions. Strong opinions are based on what we believe to be true. Yet it's possible—indeed quite likely—that we are at least partially misguided in our beliefs, because they are based on incomplete knowledge, mistaken assumptions and our own unexamined prejudice.

It's important to remember that whenever we are convinced that we are walking in the light, we are also, usually without awareness, walking in darkness—that is to say, we are missing aspects of the truth that we cannot see. The problem is that we don't know what we don't know. We can't see what we can't see, even when what we don't know or cannot see is readily apparent to the person standing next to us.

This is the great paradox of the clarity we long for and sometimes feel: we are moved to speak and to act, and we must, and yet we can also make our greatest mistakes when we are certain that we are right. We become dangerous to one another when we are *absolutely* certain that we are walking in the light, and *absolutely* certain that others are walking in darkness. In reality, we are all walking in far more darkness than we realize.

All this to say that we need one another across a spectrum of life experiences and perspectives. This is true in our families.. It's true in the church. It is especially true when addressing the most pressing issues in our respective countries.

One of the greatest challenges we face in the United States is what has been described as the rising culture of contempt. We now live in a culture saturated with contempt, in which truth is distorted for the purposes of winning an argument or discrediting those with whom disagree. In this culture of contempt, not only have we stopped listening to one another, we feel perfectly justified to speak in disdainful, hate-filled ways. Thus it has become almost impossible to have meaningful conversations across our differences. In the extreme, the culture of contempt encourages violence.

Christians are not immune to the culture of contempt, for we are a part of the country in which we dwell. We are well-represented across the spectrum of political loyalties and societal polarities. We are influenced by the same pressures as everyone else, and we commit many of the same sins. It is therefore imperative that Christian leaders speak with humility, for we are in need of the same forgiveness, mercy, and grace that we are called by God to embody for others.

At the same time, we need to be clear about what it means for us to be followers of Jesus, even when we disagree with one another. The former Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, used to say that we must learn to stand and kneel at the same time.¹ What he meant is that we, as Christians, are to stand for what we believe is right and to challenge injustice, but to do so with a humble spirit that recognizes the inherent dignity and humanity in every person, even our adversaries.

As a Christian leader in the United States, I feel called to present a vision of the Christian life that is rooted in the *Imago Dei*, the belief that all human beings have inherent dignity as those created in the image of God. And that we are meant to live with one another with mutual regard and compassion. I feel called to offer a compelling alternative to the Christian nationalist worldview ascendant in the United States, while at the same time seeking to understand why so many Christians are drawn to it. It does no good for me to simply criticize those whose views are different from mine.

The term “Christian nationalism” is relatively new, but it is not a new phenomenon, nor unique to the United States. What we are experiencing now is a resurgence of a deep-seated strain of American exceptionalism rooted in our racist past. It encourages its adherents to see themselves as the true Christians, under constant attack from outsiders and the evils of so-called “woke” society. It is sustained by fear and lies told so many times that people come to accept falsehood as truth. It’s exhausting, actually, trying to keep up with the machinery of deception that is our current reality.

The Christian nationalist worldview is firmly aligned with the goals of the current Administration and is one of the many influences moving our country toward authoritarianism. It is also, I believe, an expression of Christianity that bears little resemblance to the teachings of Christ.

Those of us who have the ability to offer an alternative Christian vision must do so in any way we can. But it’s important that we not only speak; we must somehow manage to be *heard*. And being heard requires being in relationship.

Are all Christians in the United States who voted for President Trump Christian nationalists? Of course not, any more than all those who oppose the Trump Administration are motivated by hate for him and his supporters. But this is how we are encouraged to think and speak of one another across the divide that separates us. We say things like “I hate hateful people,” without recognizing the irony.

¹ Michael Curry, *Love Is the Way: Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times* (Avery, 2020)

A journalist asked me recently if I thought other Christian leaders should speak up more, as I have done, to address the short-sighted and mean-spiritedness that now dominates American public policy. “I suppose it would be helpful if there was a more robust and powerful response,” I said. “But I’m also persuaded that we aren’t going to inspire anyone by yelling louder than those we oppose. We need to *engage* with one another, turning away from contempt, so that we might actually work together to address the problems facing us all.”

As Christians, I believe that our greatest contribution is not only to speak, but also to *live* as best we can according to the highest aspirations of humankind as revealed to us in Jesus:

to recognize the inherent, God-given dignity of every human being

to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even to love our enemies

to share what we have and to strive for an equitable and just society

to refrain from evil and refuse to hate

to be mindful of the power of our words, and to speak without malice or contempt

to forgive, as we have been forgiven

to be willing to sacrifice, even our very lives, for the sake of love

to live in hope

If you think about it, it takes no creative energy to be cynical about the ways of the world. It’s so easy to be critical of other people. But to seek the good in others and to live in hope—that takes effort. But our faith is one of *hope*. Christianity never denies the power of evil and death, and yet it calls us to place our trust in the life-affirming power of God that is always at work for the good.

It’s not always easy to live in hope and seek the good, but God does not ask us to do the impossible on our own. It is Jesus’ spirit of love and mercy working in us and through us that can accomplish far more than we could ask for or imagine.

In the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, *Icke jag utan Gud i mig*.
Not me, but God in me.

Dare we believe that, through God’s life-affirming love, something new will emerge from the ashes of what is being lost now?

Dare we believe in the innate human capacity to take enormous evolutionary leaps for the good? Our forebears have done the seemingly impossible in the past, and It is to

that potential for future good that God beckons, even if some of us will not live to see its realization.

In closing, I want to assure you that I am not naive. I am well aware of all that is being dismantled and destroyed at the hands of those in power in my country now. There are some who might rightfully critique everything I've said this morning as lovely sentiments but woefully inadequate as a response to what's happening now. Surely dignity as a strategy and love are not enough when the forces of darkness seem so much stronger than the children of light.

But as followers of Jesus, where else are we to stand? I, for one, would rather fail with dignity and love than succeed with contempt and hatred.

Allow me me to return to the passage from the Gospel of John that we have before us today, and specifically to Jesus' prayer:

*Now my soul is troubled. And what shall I say? Father, spare me from this hour? No, it is for this reason that I have come to his hour. Father, glorify your name.”
(John 12:27-28)*

This prayer takes my breath away every time I come across it, for it is of such courage and resolve. When we take it as our own, praying as Jesus prayed, we can acknowledge our troubled souls, and that we are living in a troubled time. But like him we are not asking God to spare us, or to change what cannot be changed. Rather, with this prayer, we commit to God and one another that no matter what happens, we are here. And we will do our imperfect best to embody Jesus' way of love.

In the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, “We cannot choose the times in which we live; only how we will live in the times we are given.”

We are the ones now. It is for this hour that we have come. May we rise to its responsibilities and bear witness to the power of love—not by our power alone, but through God at work in us.

How blessed we are to be Jesus' followers and united by bonds of friendship that reach across the Atlantic. Our prayers and common witness unite us.

May God bless and keep you all.
Amen.