Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

Opening Image: *Director and producer of "Join or Die" at AISGW*.

This past week, I attended a back-to-school gathering for an independent school association that my school—Washington Episcopal—is part of. It was a time of mingling, catching up, and meeting new folks, and there was also a speaker. This year's speaker was Pete Davis, a writer and civic advocate who recently directed and produced a documentary called *Join or Die*. In this documentary, Davis demonstrates that over the past fifty years, Americans have largely stopped joining clubs, organizations, and associations. Whereas your average American fifty years ago might have been a member of a bowling club, a sewing group, a volunteer coalition, and/or a church committee, people these days are much less likely to be committed members of a group and they are much more likely to say something like, "I'm not much of a joiner."

One result of this has been the loneliness epidemic, of which I'm sure you've heard. However, Davis proposes that the dwindling membership in associations and clubs reveals something far more nefarious: the very breakdown

of our democratic society. Because we are less connected to these social and community-building structures, we are less trusting of our neighbors. Because we have less practice negotiating group dynamics, we are less capable of navigating political disagreement. Because we are doing less collaborative and creative problem-solving together, we are less empowered. As a result, people have come to see democratic action as something primarily enacted in voting booths or legislative chambers or courtrooms. Davis argues that outside of voting a couple of times a year and occasionally participating in a protest, we've largely outsourced our civic engagement to a small group of elected officials. Or, to put it simply, we've relegated the redemption of our country to those we assume have more power than we do. **PAUSE.**

Movement #1: *The religious leaders have also outsourced their redemption.*

Well, so too, have the religious leaders in today's gospel passage. It seems that the religious leaders of Jesus' time are also expecting redemption to come from outside themselves and via traditional power structures. When Jesus asks the Pharisees, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" the immediate

response is, "[He is] the son of David." In other words, when Jesus inquires, "From where will salvation come?" the answer is: "From the expected place, of course; from the establishment, the royal family; from a singular lineage of people in power."

In a way, this is understandable. The Davidic kingdom is lauded all throughout the Hebrew scriptures, and much of the messianic literature speaks of God restoring David's "house" and lineage. Yet, in another sense, the answer the religious leaders give lets them off easily. If the Messiah is to come as David did, there's nothing they can really do until this heroic figure rises up to return things to how they were back in "the good ol' days." Until then, all they can do is sit pretty, enjoying what power and privilege they've amassed under the Roman Empire.

Movement #2: *But Jesus rejects this outsourced model of redemption.*

But, unsurprisingly, Jesus challenges these assumptions about the Messiah. Jesus complicates the idea that the redemption of God's people is constrained to traditional power structures or "the way things have always been." In order to disrupt this idea, Jesus cites a Psalm written by David, in which David describes

God as talking to another person with the title of "Lord." According to Jesus' interpretation, this Lord is not merely a follower in David's footsteps, but actually someone that David himself defers to. Therefore the Messiah should not be thought of as someone who will replicate David's reign, but rather as someone and something entirely different.

As befuddling as this may seem to the religious leaders with their preconceived notions of who the Messiah will be, this is ultimately a good thing. Because if we re-examine King David's story more closely, looking beyond the glorified and sanitized version some parts of scripture espouse, the fact is that the Davidic kingdom was far from perfect, and the peace and prosperity it established were short-lived. I'm thinking here of the tragedy of Bathsheba and Uriah, and of David's sons warring with one another and staging a coup. And things continue to crumble with David's direct successor, Solomon, and by the time his grandson takes the throne, we see a civil war and the splitting of the Israelite kingdom. When we recall all of this, we may begin to wonder if a Messiah who follows closely in David's footsteps is really the best bet for the redemption of God's people.

Movement #3: *Jesus points to a different model of redemption, of loving God & neighbor*

But if this is not the model of redemption for God's people—the one where they passively await a new king like David—then what is? Fortunately, Jesus offers a different plan for redemption, one that has at its core the divine commandments Jesus uplifts at the beginning of today's passage. Jesus' model of redemption is not about royal lineage or the amassing of political power; instead, it hinges on everyday people embodying God's command to love God and to love their neighbors as themselves.

Think about it: for the past several months at this point, we've been reading through Jesus' teachings and parables in Matthew that talk about what the kingdom of heaven is like. And again and again, these lectionary passages have taught us that the kingdom of heaven starts out small and unassuming, yet it grows and spreads in unpredictable and surprising ways. Far from the kingdom of heaven relying on royal might or institutional power, this kingdom relies on the quiet and steady work of God's love spreading from person to person and from community to community. We see this in the way Jesus himself embodies his ministry: traveling from place to place without a home, caring for the poor, the sick, the

needy, and the outcasts, teaching those who are hungry to learn, and eschewing any attempts to install him as a worldly ruler. This slow and steady love of God and neighbor is how Jesus built his movement to redeem all people, and it is still ongoing today, long after the empires of his time have crumbled.

Movement #4: *We are called to participate in this model of redemption; of loving God / neighbor*

Friends, I think this is the perfect passage to read in the midst of an election season, because it is so easy for us to adopt the mindset of the religious leaders in today's passage, or the mindset described in Pete Davis' documentary. It can feel truer and easier to say that nothing can change or improve unless certain people are voted in or out of power or unless things return to the way they once were. But this isn't true. All of us already have what we need to make change, because we have the Spirit of God's love within us, and we have our neighbors beside us. We have what we need to participate in God's growing kingdom, because we, with God's help, can love God and our neighbor in every day and every moment.

Now, this doesn't at all mean that I think we should abstain from voting or protesting. Of course we should still be voting in November, and of course we

should still be showing up to protests and city council meetings and political actions as we feel called to. But I also ask you to consider how you will join Jesus' movement of love and transformation in your everyday life. How will you participate in God's kingdom which is breaking into the world in unexpected and overlooked places, rather than merely focusing on top-down change?

This could look like a variety of things. It looks like building and nurturing deep friendships with those around us, so that people have someone to call when things get hard or when growth is uncomfortable. It looks like building trust and mutual aid networks at our workplaces and in our neighborhoods, so that there's a sense of safety and belonging for all. It looks like tending to our local environments, waterways, and ecosystems, so that there are enough resources to go around. It will look different for each and every person, but overall, it requires us to release our desire for a quick fix outside of ourselves, and to instead join the slow but transformative movement of love that compels every single one of us to worship God and to serve our neighbor. May this be what we commit to joining today. **Amen.**