

Post-Election Sermon – Now What?

John 17:6-11

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It's not often that I'm rendered speechless. Just ask...well, just ask about anyone who knows me. But as the time for this sermon approached, I was seriously worried I wouldn't have much to say. In light of the contentiousness of this election season and the acres of minefields that awaited me, what do I say in response to the events of this past week? The smart thing to do would be to say nothing at all and just preach "God is love," but as I've told you before, I've never been accused of doing the smart thing.

But there is something I've done which I hope will diffuse at least some of the grenades that may be launched. I wrote this sermon BEFORE the election and haven't changed a word of it since then. I didn't want to take any chances of being accused of partisanship, so I chose to put this message together before any of us knew who our president would be (and I recognize that, by the time you hear this sermon, we STILL may not know who our president will be). This sermon is not about the leadership of our country; it's about the leadership of our hearts and how we live out our faith in the midst of such a divisive time in our country.

Some of you may remember back in February, before the world ended, I preached a couple of sermons on the political divide that exists in our country, and in between, Warren Rogers and I hosted a deliberative dialogue session in which we talked together about how we as Christians can address this issue. You may remember that we had three people RSVP for that session, all saying there was no way that would attend what could be such a divisive dialogue. And then 28 people showed up.

When we asked people why they came to something that had the potential to be rife with conflict, the answers were indicative of the tumultuous times in which we live. Here are some of them: "I'm concerned about relationships breaking down over politics." "We've moved away from the ability to talk civilly." "We are moving into uncharted waters in our country." "My mom was a Republican and my dad was a Democrat and that was never a problem." "I'm concerned about the world my grandkids will grow up in." "I don't want Crestwood to be divided." "I want to know how to disagree with someone without putting them down."

All of these answers point to a fundamental aspect of the body of Christ that is under threat right now, and that's the concept of unity. Unity has defined us ever since Jesus prayed to God in John 17 that "they all be one," meaning Jesus wanted us to have the same level of intimate connection with each other that Jesus and God shared. And yet, ever since then, we've been working hard to break down that unity, to dissolve the bonds of Christian love with the acid of hate, prejudice, and judgmentalism. And, to God's dismay, we've been pretty successful. Rather than modeling unity in the midst of diversity, we Christians have led the way in pulling apart the fabric of society.

The disunity of our churches is reflected in our country. On our American currency, you'll find the phrase "E pluribus unum." "Out of many, one." We are made one by virtue of being citizens of this great country. Doesn't mean we have to agree on everything. Doesn't mean we have to like each other. Our oneness is not up to us; it simply is, by virtue of where our citizenship resides.

The same is true of our unity as believers in Christ. Unity is not an achievement to strive for; it's a gift we've already been given. We can't gain unity, but we can choose to live like it

doesn't exist, letting ourselves be divided by things that are inconsequential compared to the love of God that unites us. But we have already been given the gift of unity through our faith in Christ. Doesn't mean we have to agree on everything. Doesn't mean we have to like each other. Our oneness is not up to us; it simply is, by virtue of where our spiritual citizenship resides. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, we are "Eplurabis unum." Out of many, one.

But this election, more than any other, appears to be a grave threat to that statement. In the past few weeks, we've heard threats of violence after the election, we've been told the results may not be accepted, we've heard arguments for and against the ways people are voting. The very thing that makes our country so great – the ability to have a voice in electing a leader – is under threat, and we Americans don't always respond graciously when our freedoms are threatened. And when those freedoms are threatened from within, the chasm in our country increases.

So, now that the election is over, or will be at some point, it's time to start healing. Regardless of who our president will be for the next four years, our call remains the same: to work toward unity in the body of Christ. I chose the word "work" intentionally, because to repair the gaping wound we've created will take a lot of effort on our part. I believe it's up to the faith communities to bring about healing in our country, because I don't see anyone else who cares about that.

But healing is hard work and it may feel too daunting to us. Even though we want things to be different, sometimes it's easier just to sit back and complain about the way things are rather than to make an effort to do something about it. I love this quote from psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham, who say "It's more entertaining to watch people throw rocks at each other over the wall than it is to participate in the slow, difficult process of dismantling the wall and understanding each other's point of view."

The construction metaphor is an instructive one that works both ways, either to divide or connect. The reading from 1 Peter talks about how we as followers of Christ are living stones that are built together to create connections. In other words, we can be used to build walls or we can be used to build bridges, safe spaces, sanctuaries. I don't know about you, but I've had enough of the walls between us. It's time to start dismantling those walls and using the materials to build bridges of understanding, tolerance, and cooperation.

And it's helpful to remember that the work we are called to do is not in support of one leader or another. We can be good citizens and still disagree with our leaders. We can believe Black Lives Matter and still support our police. We can support our troops and still be against war. We can be citizens of our country and still cast a critical eye on how it's being led. When I have attended protests, it wasn't because I hate my country. It's because I love my country and believe it can be better. And that belief is rooted in my faith in God through Jesus Christ.

The work we're called to do is God's work, whether or not that's supported by a particular administration. What is that work? Psalm 146 says, "The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers, he upholds the orphan and the widow." Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, "my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." As we live out our faith in these divisive times, maybe that's a place to start, to strive to be on God's side.

To be on God's side means we're not fighting against each other, but we're fighting for those who are bowed down, held captive, blinded by oppression and prejudice. It means we're doing the hard work of unity, of reconciliation, of seeking justice. It's easy for us to default to

Christian platitudes like, “My thoughts and prayers are with you.” But, as we’ve learned the hard way, that’s not enough. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t pray; of course we should! But it also means that we should follow up our prayers with action that seeks to pursue with fervor what we’re asking God to do. If we pray for God’s kingdom to come here on earth, what are we doing to make that happen in our own lives? In our own communities?

Disciples pastor Derek Penwell wrote on Monday about how we need to combine our words with actions. He talked about the idea that people are saying, “No matter what happens on Election Day, my hope and trust is in Jesus.” And that’s important, because we need to ground ourselves in the gift of Jesus Christ, which transcends any worldly concept or conflict. But then Penwell asks, “What does this look like in practice?” For me, it looks like doing the work of God’s kingdom to make sure everyone knows the love and grace of God, that everyone has a voice in what’s going on, that everyone is treated as a neighbor, not as a tax collector or enemy. Penwell concludes his post by saying, “That is to say, if your hope and trust are indeed in Jesus, then regardless of who you are, because of your neighbors, you have a great deal riding on what happens on Tuesday--which means your hope and trust isn't an attitude, it's your marching orders.”

“Marching orders.” I love that. Regardless of who wins the election, we have work to do. Are there people who don’t know from where their next meal will come? We have work to do. Are there people who are being wrongly targeted and imprisoned? We have work to do. Are there people who fear for their safety simply because of the color of their skin or who they love? We have work to do. Are there people held captive by addiction or mental illness? We have work to do.

I see a lot of energy expended these days on complaining, arguing, and perpetuating conflict. We need to stop it, because that’s not a reflection of the unity Christ prayed for. Let’s take that energy and direct it toward doing God’s work in this world, making a difference in a way that honors God’s and reflects Christ’s love. Whether our president is Joe Biden or Donald Trump, our marching orders don’t change. You’re never going to change someone’s mind with your political Facebook post or rant against the people in charge. But you WILL change someone’s life if you direct that energy toward meeting their needs as human beings made in God’s image.

Jesus prays, “That they may all be one.” Sometimes this concept of unity seems unreachably far away. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, “Christian unity is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality in which we may participate.” I am connected to you. You are connected to me. And we are connected to those around us, those like us and those not like us. If we forget that connection, then those not like us become Others, and the body of Christ once again fractures. It seems like, in our world today, we have forgotten a very simple fact. There is no “them”; there is only us. “E pluribus unum.” We are so far from that, aren’t we? We have work to do. So, let’s get to it.