

Proper 12C 2016 Sermon

Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

[Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.]

Paul writes a letter to the Colossians because he has received disturbing news that some of the members of the Church there are being led astray by a different “philosophy.” The *Contemporary English Version* reads: “Don’t let anyone fool you by using senseless arguments. These arguments may *sound* wise, but they are only human teachings. They come from the powers of **this** world and not from Christ.” (v. 8, CEV) Some verses later, Paul warns against those who are “puffed up without cause by a **human** way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.” (vss. 18-19, NRSV) Paul is concerned about the health and unity of the Body of Christ, which is being split apart by

“arguments [which] may sound wise, but... are only human teachings. They come from the powers of *this* world and not from Christ.” (v. 8, CEV)

My friends, it never ceases to amaze me how often our lectionary readings speak directly to us in our own day and age. Today, as we stand between the Republican and Democratic national conventions, I feel convicted by Paul’s warning against “a human way of thinking... not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body [and that includes Republicans **and** Democrats], nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth *that is from God.*” Yet it seems that in our country, we don’t even *want* to be held together, so divisive is the spirit at large in the land; and if we are growing at all, it is NOT with a growth that is from God.

What has astonished me throughout this election season is how people who claim to be good Christians act and speak in a manner which in no way, shape, or form resembles the mind, the spirit, or the teaching of Christ. We have heard, over and over again, vitriol, fear-mongering, name-calling which we would not permit on a grade school playground, distorting and sidestepping the truth, and comedians who, in their witty disdain, mockery, and scorn, stir up an air of condescending superiority which – regardless of its veracity – is just as mean-spirited and divisive as the candidates they deride.

Bryan Roberts, in an article in *Relevant Magazine* titled, “7 Things Christians Need to Remember About Politics: How to be **in** the world, not **of** the world, in a culture of political vitriol,” paints a vivid image of how Christians in political elections often behave. He writes:

“Political discourse is the Las Vegas of Christianity—the environment in which our sin is excused. Hate is winked at, fear is perpetuated and strife is applauded. Go wild, Christ-follower. Your words have no consequences here. Jesus doesn’t live in Vegas.

“Not only are believers excused for their political indiscretions, but they are often applauded for committing them. Slander is explained away as righteous anger; *winning* arguments are esteemed higher than truthful ones (whether or not the ‘facts’ align); and those who stir up dissension are given the pulpit.”¹

Theology professor Richard Crane offers another image, saying that, “Perhaps the current political rhetoric can be compared to a skilled magician who performs magic tricks before our eyes by directing our

attention to what she or he wants us to see. As Christians, do we, like the biblical prophets, have the responsibility to call attention to what the magician is doing with his or her other hand?"² Are **we** like magicians, outwardly showing an illusion of Christianity, while keeping hidden from others – and even from ourselves! – the very UN-Christian spirit in our hearts?

Where is the spirit of Christ among Christian political candidates and their Christian followers? **Where** is there any humility whatsoever?

My friends, it is *not* my intention to argue for one candidate over another. It **is** my intention – and my responsibility as your priest – to challenge all of us to examine our own spirits to see where there may be, in our hearts, hatred, animosity, prejudice, a sense of moral superiority and self-righteousness, an egoistic individualism, or an “us-vs.-them” mindset which foments division within the Body of Christ, both in our community and in this nation of ours. For if, as Paul warns in our Epistle, we are being “led astray” by a “human way of thinking” (and I think we are), then, my friends, our main problem is **not** who is or is not elected President; our main problem is the state of our *souls* – both our individual souls, and the soul of our nation.

“As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *continue to live your lives in him...*” **That’s** what we are being called to do – to continue, even in the midst of a toxic political climate, to live our lives ***in Christ***, not to place our hopes in whatever present-day candidate is vying for our vote!

So what does it mean to “continue to live our lives in Christ?” Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?” (Mark 8:34-36)

My friends, that’s the *first* question we need to ask ourselves: “What will it profit us to gain the whole world – elect ***our*** candidate leader of the most powerful nation in the world – at the cost of forfeiting our personal and national soul?”

“See to it,” Paul writes, “that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to **human** tradition... and *not* according to Christ.” So the *second* question we need to ask ourselves is: “Am I captive

to a *different* philosophy, according to human tradition and not according to Christ?”

My friends, to ask these questions of ourselves is not easy, and requires great courage; for we are by nature defensive when it comes to our own beliefs and biases - especially when we have allowed these beliefs and biases to define who we are as members of one group over and against another. So the *third* question to ask is, “Which identity do we hold as **first** and most important? Our identity in Christ, or our identity with another philosophy or political party or nationality?”

To ask ourselves these questions requires an unflinching honesty and vulnerability, difficult indeed in a charged political climate of attack and defensiveness. Yet vulnerable and honest we must be, if we are to “continue to live our lives in Christ,” as Paul exhorts.

A clear example of how difficult it is to be completely honest and vulnerable is the fact that prominent Christian leaders have taken different sides throughout this election. I suppose that should not come as *too* much a surprise, since we all tend – myself included – to cherry-pick our arguments and our Scripture passages to support our own biases and viewpoints. Add to this the fact that we only read or listen to those news outlets or commentators or comedians which support our predisposed biases (and the news outlets and commentators and comedians are very good at appealing to our baser instincts and fears rather than our better angels), and it is little wonder that there are Christians who support different candidates. But Christ is not double-minded, which makes the honest self-examination of our *own* motivations, prejudices, anger, self-righteousness, and blindness all the more crucial.

So how do we go about this? I think we can test the words, the policies, the behaviors, the attitudes of the candidates and political parties and our own selves against the preponderance of the teachings of the New Testament and the spirit of Jesus.

In his great statement about Christian freedom, the Letter to the Galatians, Paul writes: “you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” (Galatians 5:13-15)

Daniel Darling, Vice President for Communications for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, writes, “Christians vote best when they know that the city they are looking for is not a new and improved America, but the city whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10).”³

At the beginning of today’s Epistle, Paul writes: “As you have received Christ Jesus *the Lord*, continue to *live your lives in him*.” That Christ Jesus was *Lord* was the subversive claim of the early Church, since the Roman Empire – the political state under which Jesus and his disciples lived – claimed that Caesar *alone* was Lord. The political ruler was a god. For Christians to proclaim a *different* Lord, therefore, was treason. Now, in his Letter to the Philippians, Paul explained how it is that Jesus came to **be** Lord. I’d like to finish today by reading that passage. I ask you to listen carefully, with our current political campaign in mind, and – more importantly – with your **own** attitude toward the candidates in mind. So please close your eyes, quiet yourself, take in a deep breath, and breathe it out. Rest in the Spirit of God. Now listen to what God is saying to you in this passage from Philippians, in light of your own feelings about this election campaign:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. **Therefore** [*because* of his humble self-emptying, obedience, and death] **therefore** God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is **Lord**...” (Philippians 2:3-11)

¹ February 1, 2016. <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/current/politics/7-things-christians-need-remember-about-politics>

² <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/current/politics/how-christians-should-engage-election>

³ <http://www.patheos.com/Topics/Faith-and-Politics/Faith-and-Politics-Richard-Crane?offset=1&max=1>