



SUNDAY SERMON

One Body with Different Politics following One Lord

The Gospel according to John, chapter 15, verse 5, and verse 9 to 17.

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing ... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

On more than a few occasions I've been asked, how do you speak up for justice in this political climate? How do you stand up for your beliefs while pastoring a church determined to provide a large tent and embrace the full political spectrum of our population? At first blush, it's complicated.

Some of my colleagues have decided to keep politics out of the pulpit altogether. To quote Jeremiah, they preach peace, peace, when there is no peace. I have other colleagues on right and left who have so closely aligned their interpretation of the Gospel with one political side or the other as to be indistinguishable therefrom.

It is complicated, but in truth, the way is clear. Spoiler alert: the answer is "as I have loved you, so you shall abide in my love and love one another."

As people of God, as followers of Christ, we must and we shall stand up for justice. We must and we shall engage with our heart, mind and body in the vital political issues of our day. We must and we shall name and resist evil and injustice whenever we see it, just as we must and we shall name holiness and grace whenever we see it. This is a radical position, but only as radical as the very first prophets and every prophet since, called by God to speak truth to power, to speak love to oppression, to stand and walk with the least, the lost, the lonely and afraid.

From Moses and Miriam, Amos, Micah, Mary and Jesus, we receive these words: you shall care for and be good stewards of the earth God has created. "You shall love the stranger, the alien in your midst, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. As you did it to one of the least of these, so you did it to me." "I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you." "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." So the mandate is clear. Agreed? Amen? In truth, this is our reason for being as the church.

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DATE

The Sixth Sunday
after the Epiphany
Sun., Feb. 12, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

READINGS

Micah 6:1-8
Psalm 119:1-8
I Corinthians 12:14-18, 21-26
John 15:5, 9-17

(note: these readings were chosen
especially for this Sunday,
in honor of our Annual Meeting)

And with this mission we are given another truth, expressed variously and emphatically in our scripture today: that in Christ we are one body, with many parts; we are one vine, with many branches. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul is addressing a community that is squabbling and at odds with itself, at risk of splitting into different camps. "The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice."

In John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking to the disciples at the last supper. He has washed their feet, fed them with bread and wine, body and blood, and now in those most intimate and vulnerable of moments, assures them of his abiding love, and calls upon them to love one another.

These passages are functioning at three levels. At one level, these words are descriptive. We know in our own bodies that a throbbing pain in one part, affects the whole; that if we are ashamed or fearful of some part of ourselves, we are crippled from fullness of life. At another level, these words are prescriptive. They give us an ethical construct: because you are connected, branches of one vine, sisters and brothers in Christ, in whom there is neither slave nor free, Greek nor Jew, then you are to treat one another with honor and love. At the deepest level, these words are declarative: you, we are one body. "If the foot were to say, I am not a hand, that would not make it any less a part of the body." "You did not choose me but I chose you." Friends, Jesus is telling us that opting out is not an option. We can't opt ourselves out; we can't opt anyone else out. We're all in this together, like it or not. And while I am focusing primarily on a very small body – this body of St. Columba's Church and the great diversity thereof – the truth of Christ's words and of God's love are not so bound. The body of which we are a part is the whole church, the whole nation, the whole of creation. Descriptive, prescriptive, and declarative it is and ever shall be.

Let's go to the declarative – that we begin and end in God, we have no being apart from God, and thus we have no being apart from one another. Given the fierce prideful claims of our ego and intellect, that is not where most of us reside. To embrace and reside within this truth requires something of a Copernican revolution. For in any given situation, instead of beginning with me and my planet imagining the sun, moon, stars, and all the rest of you to be swirling in orbit around me, me, me, I am given to see that God is the galaxy, that Christ is the sun whose light is life and around whom we all orbit; that Christ is the vine; I and we are but branches of his life, members of his body, apart from whom... well, there really is no apart from whom, from Christ. I don't know about you, but to be centered in this truth, I pray, every day, that God open my heart and mind.

So, how does all this come together? What does it look like as we stand for justice, as one body, with our particular mix of brilliance and brokenness, of sin and grace? We do this with care, in prayer, and with utmost respect for the dignity of Christ in every person. Let me tell you a few quick stories from my experience in a church in Philadelphia. When we first explored partnering with a school in Guatemala City, some on the vestry were opposed. Twenty-five percent of the people of Philadelphia were living in deep poverty; why go to Guatemala? When we first determined to be founding member of a new interfaith community organization that would invariably support labor unions, parishioner and president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia was one of many none too enamored. In each case, we had open conversation to test the breadth of our capacity. Could we take this stand, and stay together? Could differing, even opposing, parts of the body, march under one banner? Not only did we endure, we grew stronger.

That was not the case for John and Linda Percival, long time leading members of our parish. They were conservative card-carrying members of the Republican party in a neighborhood and parish that closely approximates St. Columba's DC with a liberal, blue, left leaning majority. When they came to tell me they could stay no longer, the Percival's were very clear how important it was to them that the church take seriously and engage the political economic moral issues of the day, and they were grateful to be part of such a parish. But, they said, they could no longer abide the cheap, denigrating or nasty comments from fellow parishioners. Said they, we tolerated jokes about conservative Republicans that, had they been aimed at people who are black or gay would have made liberal hearts blanch. I've never been sorrier to see people leave a congregation that I've served.

At St. Columba's, we have, we are and we shall be standing faithful, clear and strong for protection and care of those most vulnerable, for equal rights and access to power for every person regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, developmental giftedness, political persuasion, or country of origin. We are and we shall house the homeless, feed the hungry, comfort the sick, visit the imprisoned and support those returning; we will welcome the refugee, advocate for justice, and burst out from the walls of this place sent forth to proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus.

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Given who we are and who Christ is, we're likely to push the boundaries. I pray we push the boundaries. One woman's conviction and cause may be a step too far for another. So our path toward justice – within and beyond – in our own hearts, homes, and places of work... our path toward justice is the path of love, of deep listening and deep respect, bearing no violence in our hearts or minds, or on our lips.

If we are following the way of Christ, as the body of Christ, the way will not be comfortable or easy. It will be challenging, and likely contentious. But we are not on this path because we are of one mind; we are on this path because we all follow one Lord, as one body, in whom and through whom all things are possible.

We are on this path because the world is in great need of love, and Christ has chosen you, chosen each of us to be witnesses and bearers of that love. "I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. I am giving you these commands that you may love one another." Amen.