

When Kindred Live in Unity

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

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Psalm 133

¹How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

²It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. ³It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

James 4:1, 11-12; 5:7-16

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor? ⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

¹²Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. ¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Today's sermon closely follows last Sunday's pairing of a psalm and a reading from the Letter of James to help us consider our calling to Christian community. Last week we took up the critical concern for people of faith to use language that is "acceptable" to God.

In a time in which words have come to be used carelessly and dangerously to tear down human relationships, we heard the biblical admonition to remember the gift of human speech is the primary way we are made in the image and likeness of God. Words have the power to create worlds, and how we speak affects how we treat one another. Last Sunday's sermon ended with the question: Is there something in our voices – the daily use of loving, forgiving, kind and generous words perhaps; is there something in our voices that is unmistakably Christian?

Today's lessons raise a related and no less challenging question. In the current political climate of dissention, during these weeks of Impeachment Hearings that have all of us tuned in to how bitterly divided our American society has become, can the church be a beacon of light for human unity – for genuine community?

Journalist Tom Junod has created the upcoming film about his good friend, Mister Rogers and his television neighborhood for children. He wrote recently: "I am often asked what Fred Rogers would have made of our time – what he would have made of Donald Trump, what he would have made of Twitter, what he would have made of what is generally called our *polarization*, but is in fact the discovery that we do not like our neighbors very much... we do not like our neighbors very much once we encounter them proclaiming their political opinions on social media." ¹

As people whose primary calling is to love God and to love neighbor, can the church model any semblance of civility over and against the incivility of our culture? As with our consideration of using

¹ Tom Junod, "My Friend Mister Rogers," The Atlantic, December 2019.

acceptable speech last Sunday, while these days may feel like we are facing altogether new realities; the questions of unity and civility are not really new.

During another season of civil unrest in this country, which many of us remember, a now rather well known conversation took place about the relationship between the church and the political arena. At the height of the Vietnam War, Vice President Hubert Humphrey met with a delegation of church people who were protesting the war. The group was headed by William Sloane Coffin, Chaplain at the time of Yale University. Humphrey was trying to defend the administration's position – frustrated with the way the war was going – feeling the tensions rising in the nation, and irritated by the impertinence of these church people challenging their political leadership.

Humphrey lashed out in frustration at Coffin: “Well, Reverend, what would you do? How would you go about stopping this war?” Bill Coffin famously replied, “Sir, the task of the church is to proclaim, ‘Thus saith the Lord – let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as an ever-flowing stream.’ It is the task of the politicians to provide the irrigation system.”²

Today we would be challenged to find two politicians from opposing sides of the aisle to work together on an irrigation system, but we would also be hard pressed to find a unity of spirit among the church to stand together and to stand up for something as critical as, “the things that make for peace.”³

We all know the divisions of our current political climate are not left at the door when we enter the sanctuary, and folks come to church with strong feelings about how the church, as a body of believers, should be responding to the swirling political chaos around us. On the

² William Sloane Coffin Jr.: *A Holy Impatience*.

³ Luke 19:42

one hand, there are those who believe that the separation of Church and State means that we should never take up political matters in worship. On the other hand, there are those who wish our preaching and prayers were more politically engaged, even more politically persuasive. Let me address each in turn.

If you think politics should never be taken up in the pulpit, then you were probably not in worship that day Jesus preached his first sermon: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.*⁴

From the time the Ten Commandments came down with Moses from Mount Sinai through the entire ministry of Jesus, every biblical commandment has political significance and ramifications. The laws of God are given for the wellbeing of human society and every single one of them directs how we should treat one another, care for the poor, welcome the foreigner and stranger, and establish justice in the land. The separation of Church and State does not mean that the church doesn't talk about political matters; it means we stand across the street from the state house and speak truth to power. Based on the commandments of God, we advocate for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. We love God by loving our neighbors. Further, in our Presbyterian tradition, our focused belief in the sovereignty of God over every aspect of human life means we are called to live our faith in the public square working for peace and justice.

However – that does not mean that we all agree on political matters, nor that the church should enter the fray of every political debate as Judge and Jury. It is not our job – as worship leaders – to bring every issue that is raging on the front page of the newspaper into the context of worship or to try to be politically persuasive. Sitting ten feet from any one of you in the pews of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church is

⁴ Luke 4:18-19

someone who voted differently from you, and who will never vote as you do.

Another one of our historic, formative theological affirmations is “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” and every single one of us is granted by God freedom of conscience. Our job is to proclaim the gospel and to build up the Church of the Jesus Christ for the work of the Kingdom of God. And that gospel – nurtures, guides and convicts each one of us. Because of the current political tension and chaos in our country, for those of you who come to worship longing for the preacher – usually me – to disparage President Trump and his administration, I am inclined to remind you of Anne Lamott’s insight when she said: “You can safely assume you have created God in your own image, when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”⁵

Which brings us to the real basis of this sermon – the biblical affirmation of Psalm 133, and the instruction from the Letter of James. Psalm 133 comes from a series of Psalms of ascent, which means they were songs that huge numbers of people sang together as they made pilgrimage up to the Temple in Jerusalem. *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.* Then come these metaphors that invoke the promises of God whom the throngs gather to worship. Oil on the beard of Aaron – like the dew of Mount Hermon falling down. On Mount Hermon the Lord declared the blessing of eternal life. Good oil poured so generously on the head that it runs down the beard is a sign of abundant welcome to a guest or stranger. *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity* is an affirmation of the worshipping community. Diverse people are united by God’s promise of abundant life for all people.

Biblical scholar Jim Mays commented: “The Psalm celebrates the goodness of life with which the Lord blesses those who are assembled

⁵ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, p. 22.

by the Lord's presence. In services of Christian unity, the psalm is a witness that God is at work building a family that transcends all the given and instituted barriers that separate and diminish human life.”⁶

We hear a similar proclamation from James: *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters... who are you to judge your neighbor? Be patient.... Do not grumble against one another so that you may not be judged! See, the Judge is standing at the doors!*

Friends, I believe all of us are being convicted and being challenged by these words. As people of faith, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, for any one of us to think we should never get political in church – that is a shallow reading of the gospel. And likewise to think that we as a church should take sides on every hotly debated political issue is a shallow understanding of ecclesiology who we are called to be as a church. Being the church is about something much deeper and more profound than being like-minded. It's about loving God, and loving neighbor, particularly our neighbors in need, and those with whom we disagree.

According to the Harvard political science professors who authored *How Democracies Die*, we should all be concerned about the deep and growing polarization in our country by political affiliation. In the past, our two party system had less-pronounced ideological differences and division; there was more toleration, forbearance and restraint.

Over the past couple of decades the differences between the two parties have become more pronounced, and we are hardening into suspicion and animosity in speech and action. They caution us to pay attention. The diverse complexity of who we are as Americans is a gift. But if we lose all semblance of mutual toleration, trust and forbearance we will completely lose a commitment to the common good. Likewise,

⁶ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation Commentary, p. 413.

in our divided times, if the church loses patience, endurance, and a sharing in suffering, praise and prayer, to use James' words, then we will have lost our charter as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ.

In our time of incivility, we are being called to model a unity in Christ that transcends the human differences that divide us. In that previous era of the 1960's civil unrest, when leading worship William Sloane Coffin used to deliver a charge and benediction that included these words: May God give you grace never to sell yourself short. Grace to risk something big for something good. Grace to remember that the world is too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love. No matter your political party, it is time for more love. Within the church, within this church, it's time for more love to shine as a beacon of light for genuine, human community.

Friends, love your neighbor, get to know and love your neighbors in the pew, be patient with one another, because The Judge of all of us is standing at our doors.

AMEN.