

A Dwelling Place for God
Joshua 5:13 – 15; Ephesians 2:11 – 22
Sunday, November 8, 2020

So I'm *guessing* that this has been a pretty big week in the life of our country. I have no idea, because I wrote and recorded this sermon on Monday afternoon. So I don't know the results of the election, who won, who lost, or how it all happened (or if we even *know* who won yet). And while, by doing it this way, I risk missing something that really needs to be addressed, I wanted to do it this way for a very specific reason. I don't want to be *reacting* to whatever happens, because I think that no matter *what* happens, the message for us should be the same.

This morning (Monday morning) I read an article in Time magazine by Andy Stanley. Andy is the pastor of a large non-denominational church outside of Atlanta, very prominent among evangelical Christians. The article is titled, "What Christians Should Do If Their Candidate Loses the 2020 Election." And it's a really *good* article. But I *knew* that if I talked about it *after* the results of the election were already *known*, then it would seem like I was preaching to *one specific side*. And I think that the message of his article is something that we *all* need to hear, regardless of which side we're on, which candidate we support.

Stanley writes this, "Nothing divides like politics, because nothing divides like fear. But what exactly, in the context of our current election, are we afraid of? The answer is the same for everyone at the macro level: we fear loss. We are afraid of losing control, safety, power, opportunity, status, rights, freedom. Some people fear what *might* happen. Some people fear what has *already* happened and what might happen *next*. We all fear the unknown. With political ads peddling fear around the clock, we gather in our political corners. Neighbors divide

by way of yard signs. Families divide over political reporting, factual or not. And church congregations find themselves split down party lines, inside and outside the church walls.”¹

It reminds me of this obscure story from the book of Joshua – it’s only three verses long, but it has come to have great meaning for me. The people of Israel have left slavery in Egypt. They have wandered through the wilderness for 40 years before finally entering into the land that God has promised to them. Moses led them, but now Moses has died, and Joshua has taken over. Along the way they have fought battles with the various tribes that were living in the lands that they came into. So it has been battle after battle, constant conflict with the people around them. And *this* story takes place just as they are preparing to attack and conquer the city of Jericho. Joshua is getting ready to lead the people of Israel into battle, when he looks up and sees a man standing before him with a sword in his hand. He asks the man, “Are you one of *us*, or one of our *adversaries*?”

Because when all you’re doing is fighting battles, every stranger is a potential enemy.

Joshua says, “Are you one of *us* or one of *them*,” to which the man replies, “Neither.” Well, you’re either *with us* or *against us*, right? You’re either one of *us* or you’re one of *them*. That’s the way the world works. If you’re not one of *us*, and you’re not one of *them*, then *who are you*? The man says, “I am a commander of the army of the Lord.” Joshua falls down on his face and says, “What do you command your servant, Lord? What do you want me to do?” And he says to Joshua, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy.”

¹ <https://time.com/5905783/christians-election-2020/>

God does not get drawn into the tribalism of *us* and *them*. Instead, the messenger of the Lord stands between opposing factions and reminds them that they are in the presence of God.

We live in a world where we are constantly pushed to choose which side we are on. “Are you *conservative* or *liberal*? Are you one of *us* or one of *them*?” The defining point of our culture has become what *tribe* you are a part of. And when we come to view one another as nothing but members of opposing factions, every encounter becomes a battle that must be won. But what if – as individuals and as the church of Jesus Christ – when the world asks us, “Which side are you on? Are you one of *us* or are you one of *them*,” we said, “Neither,” and instead stand between opposing factions and remind them that they are in the presence of God?

That doesn't mean we don't *stand* for anything, because followers of Jesus Christ are *always* called to stand for *justice* over *injustice*, for *love* over *fear*. It just means that, *as* followers of Jesus Christ, we don't buy into this false cultural dichotomy of *us* and *them*. That we are *all* called to live life together, and so *our* place is not on the *right* or on the *left*, but *in between* them, drawing them back together, calling *all* people to live their lives in the presence of God.

This is like what Paul talks about in his letter to the Ephesians. When the church first started out, there were these factions of *us* and *them*; that to be a Christian, you had to be Jewish, because if you were *not* Jewish you were a *Gentile*, and Gentiles were *outside* the blessing and favor of God. So these Ephesians would have been *outsiders*, because they were not Jewish, they were *Greek*; they were *Gentiles*.

But what the church started to discern was that maybe God was at work among the *Gentiles*, too. So they could become Christians, they just had to become Jewish *first* (they had to be

circumcised and follow Jewish law). Then they started to discern that maybe they *didn't* need to do all of that. Maybe God loved them and accepted them *just the way they were*. So the *us* and *them* became *us*. And Paul writes to the Ephesians, “You Gentiles, who at one time were *outsiders*, without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to God’s covenant, and having no hope; you who were once *far off* have been *brought near* by the blood of Jesus Christ. For *he* is our peace. He has made both groups into *one*, and has broken down the dividing wall, the *hostility* between us. He has made one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and reconciling both groups to God in *one body*.”

Paul says that Christ came and proclaimed peace “to you who were far off,” and Christ proclaimed peace “to you who were near.” So we “are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” We are part of *one kingdom, one family* in Christ. In him, Paul says, “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

So it’s not just reminding the world that *we* are in the presence of *God*. It’s also reminding the world that the presence of *God* is in *us*. When we look at each other, we cannot see strangers and aliens, us and them, conservative and liberal, insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies. When we look at one another – even that person with whom you most vehemently disagree – we are called to see Christ. Not to define ourselves by the politics of red and blue, because *our* red is the blood of Jesus Christ that was shed for *all* people, and blue is the color of royalty, because we are citizens of the kingdom of God, serving Jesus Christ the King of Kings.

I've talked a lot lately about how St. John's has always been intentional about never identifying as a conservative or liberal church. That has not always been *easy* or *popular*, but we feel called by God to be a church where *all people* can come together and share in the grace and peace of Jesus Christ. That we exist to show the world that it *is* possible for conservatives and liberals, black, white, Asian, Latino, Arabic – it is possible for *all of us* to love one another and live life together as one. We are here to bear witness to the world of the *life* and the *love* that is possible in Christ and to give them a *glimpse* of what the kingdom of God looks like. We *know* what the kingdom of *man* looks like and how *that* works, and I don't know about you, but I'm ready to see something *different*.

Author Rachel Held Evans writes that “church is a good place to practice being with people with whom you disagree, which is to say, a good place to practice being human.” But to *do* that, we cannot allow our *politics* to shape our *faith*. We have to let our *faith*, the teachings of Jesus Christ, shape our politics and how we live life together.

In that article I mentioned earlier, Andy Stanley goes on to say, “Our hope is not in the perfect political party. Our hope is the message and teaching of Jesus. Why would we, as followers of an eternal king, allow ourselves to be divided by temporary political systems, leaders, or platforms? And why would we allow ourselves to be divided by fear? Jesus' most oft-repeated command was *fear not, fear not, fear not*. Instead, we must love one another as we struggle and sacrifice for the unity Jesus prayed for” when he said to God, “May *they* be *one*, as *we* are *one*.”

Stanley offers two suggestions for how Christians should approach this election, and I think it holds true regardless of the outcome. We should *pray for unity*, and we should *love unconditionally*. He says, “Find a way to love someone with whom you disagree politically. If

you're thinking, 'Well, I don't even *know* anybody I disagree with politically,' that's a problem. If you're thinking, 'I can't understand how anybody could believe [what they believe],' then you just made a confession. There's something you don't understand, and you can *seek* understanding. I invite you to seek out an opportunity to unconditionally love someone with whom you disagree politically." Because as it says in 1 John, "love casts out fear." When we *love* someone – or even *strive* to love them, *struggle* to love them – when we truly get to *know* them and *understand* them, then we become less *afraid* of them.

Stanley says, "Christians can disagree politically, but we must love unconditionally and pray for unity. Fear should not fuel our actions. Love is the power we need, and love must fuel both our conversations and choices. The gospel will spread just as Jesus intended when we...are willing to humble ourselves and seek unity in love."

I don't know what has happened in the days since I have recorded this. But I do know *this*: Christ calls us to love, *always, no matter what*. To *live* and *be* in ways that show patience and kindness and truth and hope. And not just with those who are *like* us and *agree* with us, but those who are *different* from us, even those who *oppose* us. We cannot always control what happens in the world around us, but we can control *that*. We can control our *response*, our ability to choose love. We are called in this divided, warring world to stand in the midst of opposing factions and remind them that they are in the presence of God and to help them *see* God's presence in one another.

Whoever won this week, whatever happened, *that* is the work that is before us. To live in love so that we might be able to live with each other. Because when all this is said and done, when whoever won leaves office, we're still going to have to live with each other. And our ability to

do that doesn't depend upon any candidate or party platform. It depends upon our willingness to *listen* to one another and *learn* from one another and *understand* one another and *pray* for one another and *love* one another. *That* is the way of Christ, and *that* is what will save us from being consumed by hatred and fear. Let us pray.