

Love... Welcome... Share...

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Isaiah 51:12-16 The Lord says, "I am the one who strengthens you. Why should fear mortal man, who is no more enduring than grass?" (v. 12)
- 1 Peter 4:8-10 ⁸ Above everything, love one another earnestly, because love covers over many sins. ⁹ Open your homes to each other without complaining. ¹⁰ Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he has received from God.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: With Jesus as our guide, we seek to love... and welcome... and share....

If you caught my newsletter column in the October issue of *The Pulse*, you'll remember that I made a bold prediction about *the day after* the General Election. I predicted that the day after the election, about 51% of Americans would be jubilant and about 49% of Americans would be chagrined. That, of course, would be based on the names at the top of the ballot. Farther down the ballot, we might have had mixed reactions to various state and county and local elections.

But the angst and jubilation and discouragement and relief that we feel is the consequence of a privilege we enjoy in our nation: the ability to have a voice in selecting the people who will serve us in public office. Of course, we know from our grade school days that not every nation is as fortunate as ours; not every country offers its citizens the privilege of voting. And even some that do, do so disingenuously. You may recall that in 2002

...after a well-publicized "show election," Iraqi officials declared that Saddam [Hussein] had been re-elected to another seven-year term as President by a 100% unanimous vote of all 11,445,638 eligible Iraqis, eclipsing the 99.96% [of the popular vote] received in 1995. Outside governments dismissed the vote as lacking credibility.¹

In our country we strive to assure that every voter counts and every vote counts.

Sometimes it's easy to tell what side someone's on. Children on a schoolyard playground may divide up into teams for some game. If you're with one team, you stand over here; if you're with the other team you go over there. You can tell what team someone's on by where they are.

Public elections in our country aren't like that. We don't necessarily know which "side" someone's on because we're all mixed together. Whether we backed Dewey or Truman, or Johnson or Goldwater, or Carter or Reagan, or Trump or Clinton, we live side by side with people who supported the other one (in fact, you may actually sleep side by side!). It makes no difference which candidate or issue we support or oppose – we all frequent the same stores and restaurants, we walk our dogs down the same streets, and yes, we sit in pews with one another.

So once again, now that the assault of political ads has come to an end (thank you, God!), as the election dust settles, we have two formidable tasks:

One task is timely – we must figure out how we will overcome the division that resulted from our differing political outlooks.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elections_in_Iraq, accessed 11/9/2016

The other task is timeless – we must consider how our attitudes and actions should be shaped by our faith in God. As people for whom faith is a central part of our lives, how will we go forward? As people who claim Jesus as our master and our example, how will we express ourselves in the public arena?

Some verses from the little New Testament book called 1st Peter point us in the right direction for how to go forward. In the fourth chapter Peter wrote,

⁸ Above everything, love one another earnestly, because love covers over many sins. ⁹ Open your homes to each other without complaining. ¹⁰ Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he has received from God.²

Did you catch the three actions that Peter described? Let me point them out for you.

⁸ Above everything, **love** one another earnestly, because love covers over many sins. ⁹ **Open your homes** [i.e., **welcome**] to each other without complaining. ¹⁰ Each one, as a good manager of God's different gifts, must **use for the good of others** [i.e., **share**] the special gift he has received from God.³

“Love... Welcome... Share...” Be compassionate, hospitable, generous. In other words, empathize. How do we do that? Not by lumping people together and dismissing those with different views or a different background or different life experience. We show compassion, hospitality and generosity by first recognizing the humanity, the legitimacy of every person. Put yourself in their place, “they” being anybody who isn’t you. Recognize that their lives are as real to them as yours is to you. Try to imagine what daily life is like for them. Try to imagine what it’s like to live with the worries they carry in their hearts, the challenges they face every day, the aspirations they strive for.

Certainly you’ve heard the expression “Walk a mile in his moccasins.” Although attributed to various Native American nations, the quote actually comes from a poem written by Mary T. Lathrap in 1895. The original title was *Judge Softly*. Have you ever heard the poem before?

Pray, don't find fault with the man that limps,
Or stumbles along the road.
Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears,
Or stumbled beneath the same load.

There may be tears in his soles that hurt
Though hidden away from view.
The burden he bears placed on your back
May cause you to stumble and fall, too.

Don't sneer at the man who is down today
Unless you have felt the same blow
That caused his fall or felt the shame
That only the fallen know.

You may be strong, but still the blows

² 1 Peter 4:8-10 Good News Translation

³ 1 Peter 4:8-10 Good News Translation

That were his, unknown to you in the same way,
May cause you to stagger and fall, too.

Don't be too harsh with the man that sins.
Or pelt him with words, or stone, or disdain.
Unless you are sure you have no sins of your own,
And it's only wisdom and love that your heart contains.

For you know if the tempter's voice
Should whisper as soft to you,
As it did to him when he went astray,
It might cause you to falter, too.

Just walk a mile in his moccasins
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.
If just for one hour, you could find a way
To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.

I believe you'd be surprised to see
That you've been blind and narrow-minded, even unkind.
There are people on reservations and in the ghettos
Who have so little hope, and too much worry on their minds.

Brother, there but for the grace of God go you and I.
Just for a moment, slip into his mind and traditions
And see the world through his spirit and eyes
Before you cast a stone or falsely judge his conditions.

Remember to walk a mile in his moccasins
And remember the lessons of humanity taught to you by your elders.
We will be known forever by the tracks we leave
In other people's lives, our kindnesses and generosity.

Take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins.⁴

When we put our energy behind loving others, welcoming others, sharing with others, we can begin to bridge the chasms of misunderstanding that separate us, we can begin to remove the wedges of bitterness that have pushed us apart.

I was reading this week about a preacher and his family who were visiting our nation's capital, and one of their stops was at the Lincoln Memorial. Writing about his impressions from the trip he wrote,

There is something about standing in the Lincoln Memorial and reading the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address which gives you goosebumps. One line in the Second Inaugural reminds you what a caring and

⁴ <https://www.aaanativearts.com/native-american-poetry/walk-a-mile-in-his-moccasins>, accessed 11/10/2016

compassionate man Lincoln was. He was speaking about the coming end of the War [when he looked for a time] “With malice toward none; with charity for all.”

Lincoln put this idea into practice on the day that news arrived in Washington that the war was over. A crowd gathered at the White House and a military band was playing some festive music. Lincoln stood on the balcony of the White House and spoke. Instead of lashing out against the South, he spoke of the horrors of war. He spoke of families getting back together. He spoke of a time of peace. Then he said, “In a few moments I want the band to play and I'm going to tell them what I want them to play.” Of course, the band started getting the “Battle Hymn of The Republic” ready to play. This had been the theme song of the North throughout the Civil War. But Lincoln crossed them up. He stood there and said, “The band will now play the theme song of the people we have called our enemy. They are not our enemies any more! We are one people again. I want the band to play 'Dixie.'”

Historians say there was a long, awkward pause. The band didn't have the music to “Dixie,” but they finally got together and played “Dixie.” Lincoln knew that the South was not only hurting because of the horrors of the war, but also because of the shame which accompanies defeat. Lincoln was sending a clear signal to the South. Lincoln was telling everyone that there would be no punishment upon the South. Lincoln was saying that the South would be treated with love and compassion.

When you love, after the patterns of Jesus, caring and compassion become the cornerstone of your love. Love is not vicious or hostile. Love does not try to compound the guilt. Love doesn't try to rub salt in the wounds of shame.⁵

As a congregation of women and men and children who look to Jesus as our master and our example, we are a laboratory for society. We are a laboratory where we test and try new ways of living together that seem counterintuitive to the rest of society. We experiment with what it is to live lives based on love, not suspicion. How can people live together based on hope, not fear? How can people live together based on generosity, not greed? We strive to live together – aware that we hold many differences among us – we strive to live together in peace, trusting in hope, celebrating the joy that God gives.

We take what we learn in this “laboratory” called the church and we share it with the world. As believers following the way of Jesus, we declare what “side” we’re on: we’re on the side of Jesus.

- We’re on the side that seeks to reach out in love to all people without precondition.
- We’re on the side that welcomes the stranger, those who are alone or lonely or rejected by society.
- We’re on the side that shares generously because all we have comes from the God of all who has shared generously with us.

With Jesus as our example and guide, we seek to love... and welcome... and share....

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⁵ Robert L. Allen, His Finest Days: Ten Sermons for Holy Week and the Easter Season, CSS Publishing Company.