

10-16-16
“Sour Grapes”

Scriptures

Jeremiah 31:27-34, Psalm 19, Luke 18:1-8, Revelation 14:14-20

In recent weeks, several of you have ask to speak with me about our politics. I always know that I’m in for it when someone starts a sentence with the word “Preacher” instead of my given name. You can probably guess what these questions sound like:

“Preacher, what are your thoughts on Trump, isn’t this crazy?” or...

“Preacher, that Donald Trump is kind of strange, but I just don’t think I can vote for Hillary Clinton.”

I’ve done fairly well at evading both the outright and covert requests for my opinion, and I’ve prayed long and hard about how to be a pastor at a time like this; but the long and the short of it is, I’m afraid to speak as your pastor or in the pulpit about the chaos of our current Politics. And the thing I’m most afraid of is that, in our many differences of opinion and ideology, we will somehow forget that we are children of God; I’m afraid that we will stop loving each other and our neighbors as ourselves. But I am the resident theologian in this community, that is my credential, and it is incumbent upon me to speak. There’s a lot to say, so before I get too far into this sermon, I want to make my final point clear:

The greatness of our democracy is not defined by the manner in which we agree, but by the manner in which we disagree. If one of our mottos is “E Pluribus Unum” – out of many, one – we must understand that our oneness is not a function of consensus. Rather, what must bind us together as a nation is the respect each one maintains – at all cost – for the lives and stories of those with whom we disagree. How we disagree means everything. How we disagree makes us Christians; for you have heard it said, an eye for an eye, but Jesus commands us to pray for those who would be our enemies. This is what it means for a Christian to also be a Patriot.

Please pray with and for me now:

God of the oppressed, we turn to you, scared by the dangers of speaking out loud, oppressed by our fear of vulnerability. Merciful God: give us courage for this moment. Keep our hearts open as we seek to understand your love and the life together that you give us. Grant us your peace, O Lord; and may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, give glory to your Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Has anyone here ever been poisoned – you know, brought to the point of death as some toxin leaches through the body, wreaking havoc with your organs? It was a popular method of assassination in the Middle Ages. Queen Elizabeth the first of England had several clandestine attempts made on her life with poison, and I suppose it was effective back then because forensic science without chemistry is a dubious enterprise. I'd love to say we don't hear much about people being poisoned these days, but there has been too much in recent news about the water in Flint MI, the chemicals that preserve our food, and what spills out of our factories and oil wells and exhaust pipes. The poison I'm interested in today, however, is of a different variety and seems to be present in every age of human history. It's that cocktail – made of equal parts fear, betrayal, jealousy, and hatred – which ruins the heart and mind. It's the poison which comes from chewing on the Sour Grapes of human narcissism writ large and leached between communities, cultures, religions, and economies. For centuries now, in these United States, we've been stuck in a vineyard that is producing the sourest of grapes, and I think we've all been poisoned. It's a wild vine that has grown fast and furious, taking over the gardens of our lives like Kudzu. And no matter where each one of us comes from... and no matter how each one of us got here: we're all in this mess together.

You know the sour grapes of which I speak; the taste is in everyone's mouth. It's the fruit we call American Presidential Politics, and we seem to get a bumper crop every time there's an election. There are several grapes that make up our poison. Our Politics is a varietal blend of violence, division, false dichotomy, half-truths, and defamation, with just the right addition of obfuscation, paranoia, and incivility to really turn the palate. 2016 seems to be a bumper year in the vineyard of Sour Grapes, and I'm afraid we've all laid down more than a few bottles of this vinegar in the cellar of our hearts and minds. Day after day we sip from a chalice filled with a public debate gone completely off; and no matter who one chooses to support in this election – or even if one chooses to leave the presidential ballot blank – one cannot escape that our country, our states, our churches, our extended families, and, sometimes, even our homes have been poisoned by the ire of our politics.

What's worse is that we who identify as “Christian” seem to get drunk on this swill. We read passages like Luke 18 about God taking someone's side, and we invoke the condemnation of the Almighty against our opponents. And in God's silence, we yell a little louder each day:

“You and your lot planted these weeds 50 years ago, and now look at us!”

“Me and my lot, we've got the solution – we've got the weed killer and the bulldozer, and we're gonna plow all your sour grapes under and replant with the economics, foreign policy, military, and market that we should have had all along – you know, the grapes our founders planted!”

“This vinegar is your fault...”

....is your fault!

...*IS YOUR FAULT! PRAISE THE LORD!*”

Yes... Christians do this routine better than anyone else. And this uncomfortable reality is nothing new. In our country, Christians have been at each other's throats since the 1630s, and we are just barely wise enough now to forego another blood bath; though, except for the laying down of muskets, it still feels like a Civil War. We know this because we sound so much like the folks Abraham Lincoln describes in his 2nd inaugural address. Allow me to read a portion of his text:

[At the outset of the war,] Neither party expected for the war [to reach] the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Dear friends, have we come very far from this moment? Yes, I believe we have. Is there much *much* farther to go? Yes there is. But hear these words of consolation from Jeremiah, words that precede our text today:

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

Thus says the Lord:
Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for there is a reward for your work,
says the Lord:
they shall come back from the land of the enemy;
there is hope for your future,
says the Lord:
your children shall come back to their own country.

What is the great hope of our nation if not that our children may discover and cherish a more “just and lasting peace” than that which we have heretofore attained? And shall we feed them sour grapes? We must not. For Jeremiah tells us that our sins will be our own. The sins of the father and mother do not need to pass to their children. And we will be accountable for leading any astray into violence and fear.

Jeremiah’s prophetic word asks that we become clear on what is at stake. Dear friends, the American Dream is not first an economic dream, but a political one: this insight remains the foundation of our democracy... and the legacy of our heroes... and the tragedy of our war. For what will be the basis of a just and lasting peace if not a fundamental love and respect for each other; “for we hold this truth to be self-evident, that all human beings are created equal.”

Now what is the Church, the Body of Christ, if not the incarnate revelation of the Love that makes this dream more than a promise but a reality. We are the Elect, chosen and set apart, a royal priesthood whose sacramental life together shines a light in the darkness of unrelenting Time. What is the justice of God if not that command which makes us sit down face to face and listen to each other’s stories? What is the justice of God if not that the one who is great shall be the servant of all? What is the justice of God if not mutual flourishing? We are called to live this justice in our Politics. And the only way to enact this justice is to forego victory over our enemies in favor of *relationship* with our enemies. This means we must be vulnerable; this means we must speak; this means we must step out in the courage of our faith and tell our stories with hope and love.

This is what it means to live sacramental lives.
This is what it means to take up our Cross and follow our Lord.
This is what it means to exist *together* in the Image of the Holy Trinity.
This is what it means to be a Christian first, and an American second;

for the kingdom of God is not a geo-political entity, and *all* such cartography will be erased from the landscape of the New Creation.

To often we remain silent when we should speak, because we’ve forgotten, or never learned, how to disagree with someone in a way that convinces the other that he or she is loved. Let us learn, then, how to be like Jesus – to condemn the evil and sin of the world in a way that leads to life. Let us point with every thought, word, and deed to the Cross of Calvary where the end result of our way of doing things hangs for all the world to see.

Look fully on Christ crucified;
see him suffering there;
see him drink the gall and vinegar of our sour grapes;
see him naked, crowned with thorns,
beaten, bloody, and bolted to a post, gasping for air.

Let us never – *never* dare to turn away or avert our eyes!

We must take in the full horror of our narcissism.

We must Notice in his death the way of the world – and be converted to another way!

To remain silent in the presence of evil and injustice is to be complicit;
to speak in a way that deals death is to be complicit.

The speech of the Body of Christ must reveal the Way of the Cross. This is our high calling.

So let me speak the language of the Cross, as it has come to me; for I must now refrain from silence, given the revelations of the last few days.

To tell the truth grieves me deeply; for I wonder if I will be given the chance to sit face to face with my dear friends and family who differ from me theologically and politically. I wonder if I will ever hear their stories well enough to understand, or whether they will write me off because it seems I've written them off. I am profoundly disturbed by the realization that speaking honestly about how I feel and think and love – in order to speak the language of the Cross – means that I may wound others. But the revelation of the Cross is a violent epiphany: a vision that shreds my self-righteousness and casts it away. And only this epiphany will save me from letting anger rule my heart, only this vision of the Death of God will keep me from grinding my teeth on the very sourest of grapes. When I do not keep my eyes fixed on the Cross, I wound others so that our relationships are beyond repair; and the Devil laughs, for he has won. I must speak, but if I cannot speak the truth as love, the fruit of my time in this place will, indeed, be the Grapes of Wrath. And what shall I say when I stand before my righteous judge; for the sour fruit is cut off from the vine and trampled by the wrath of God. Indeed, I am deeply grieved.

Nevertheless, I must speak.

As I mentioned at the outset, I have said little about the characters in our political drama because I lead in a community that includes a wide spectrum of political viewpoints. I have no intention to offend or belittle anyone. Because I am a shepherd of the Body of Christ, however – ordained to this task by the Spirit and commissioned through the laying on of hands – *Love* compels me to repudiate Donald Trump on theological grounds. Specifically, the mutually affirming love of the Persons of the Christian Trinity must be understood as the exact antithesis of the approach to human sexual relations implied by Donald Trump's words and demeanor. In short, the one who votes for Donald Trump must consider him or herself complicit in perpetuating the violence against women and minorities that remains a defining characteristic of his campaign. For a disciple of Jesus Christ, there can be no defense for Trump's death-dealing words and behavior.

So let me offer what I hope and pray is a word of grace: Many will despise Donald Trump and still not be able to vote for Hillary Clinton. Despite the tremendous good she has done in her career as a public servant, she has also finagled her way to the top. And I can imagine the patriotic ire of those who live with the stress of having no viable vote. For anyone who cares, the frustration must seem overwhelming at times. Each one of us must vote our conscience, but we must do so as disciples with the Cross in view at all times. And our sense of entitlement and privilege must be consumed by the fire of the Spirit who raised him from the dead.

In the meantime, remaining in relationship is possible for us by the grace of God, and we will find this grace if we take the time to tell each other our stories – the stories of where we come from and how we got here. Will Christ find faithfulness when he appears among us? Only love can tell. In the meantime, I will offer a story by the Irish Teller, Clare Muireann Murphy... a story that marks the importance of persisting in love for one another as Christ has loved us.

There were two women who had been friends from birth. They lived in the same town their whole lives and were part of every major life event the other experienced. From school yard victories and defeats, to meeting their loves, to working and living and raising children of their own, they stayed part of each other's lives. The one, however, lived a righteous life, seeking to do what was good and just insofar as she was able. The other did not and suffered through the foibles born of overturning apple carts and indulging in the what the parson called 'the desires of the flesh.' Nevertheless, through it all, the two remained close and never betrayed each other in want or need.

Well, these two women grew old and, knowing that they were nearing the end of their lives, began to talk of the eventual end of their friendship. The one said,

"You've done so right, and I've done so wrong; the thing I hate most about dying is that, when we die, we'll no longer be together. You'll go to heaven for sure," she said pointing to the sky, "and, well... we know where I'm going..." she laughed, pointing at the ground.

"Yes," her friend replied, "the worst part of dying is the thought that we'll never be together again." "But," she began to muse, "maybe the fates will grant us a meeting in the afterlife as a final gift."

Well, some months later one woman passed away, and the other one passed about three weeks later. And, sure enough, the good and righteous women found herself in heaven, and the unrighteous woman found herself in hell. After what seemed like an eternity, they were both walking through the forest one day and were granted their request. They came across one another, recognized each other, and embraced, glad to be together again.

The unrighteous woman said, “Well, I was right – I’m definitely in Hell. And where did you end up?”

The righteous women confirmed that, indeed, she had gone straight to heaven when she died.

“But what’s it like in Hell?” the righteous woman asked.

“It’s surprisingly pleasant,” the unrighteous women began. “We all live together in an enormous house, and, off the front porch, you can see a beautiful mountain range fading into the blue. The weather is splendid, with equal parts sun and rain; everything grows really well in the garden, and the food is spectacular. Every meal, we all sit down together, and the longest table you can imagine is covered with every kind of food, prepared perfectly. The only problem is, we aren’t able to get at it. The only utensils we’re given are 10-foot-long chopsticks, which I can barely pick up! We’re not aloud to eat with our hands, and we’re not aloud to just stick our faces in the food! I’m starving all the time with food all around: I tell you, it is absolute Hell! The only thing I want I can’t get, and it’s right in front of me.”

“This is most strange!” said the righteous woman. “Hell sounds very much like Heaven: we all live together in a big house with a splendid view of the mountains; the climate is perfect; and we, too, have a huge table covered in delicious food at every meal! We even have the 10-foot-long chopsticks!”

“Well, what the hell is the difference?!” the unrighteous woman asked.

The righteous woman thought for a moment, and then said quietly, “Instead of trying to feed ourselves with the chopsticks, we feed each other.”

May it be so among us,
and as we live together here,
and as we go forth as the Body of Christ,
broken and spilled out for the world.

In the Blessèd Name of
the Father/Mother,
the Holy Child, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.