

Proximity

John 15:1-8

Rev. Pen Peery

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

May 3, 2015

For the next few weeks we are going to be focusing on the question of “now what?”

“Now what?” is a perennial question for Christians who live on this side of Easter because if we take it seriously, the resurrection of our Lord is not just an historic event frozen in time; it is God’s action that forever changes the world.

In the resurrection, God set us free from a past we could not change and has opened to us a future in which we can be changed.

So now what?

Our second scripture is from the gospel of John. It is part of the speech that Jesus gave his disciples before he was crucified, died, and was buried. On this side of the grave, though, it helps us to answer our question.

Listen with me for the word of God.

+++

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 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.

+++

The Apostle Paul spent the second half of his adult life tending to the branches off the vine. That is to say, Paul spent his time starting and nurturing and challenging a network of churches that – like churches today – were a variety of shapes and sizes...some working well, others not so well. Some getting along, others riddled with conflict.

As you heard Erika read, in one of his most pointed letters to a church that he founded, Paul wrote “Now you are the body the Christ and individually members of it.”

There is a lot about this admonition that bears keeping mind, but what is most important about what Paul said is the grammar that he used.

Grammar is important. As someone who has a tendency to speak faster than I think, I am grateful for the grammarians on my staff (and in the choir...and on the organ bench) who remind me of this fact.

Paul tells the church: “You are the body of Christ....”

Not because you choose to be Christ’s body.

Not only if you want to be Christ’s body.

Not in isolation from other parts of Christ’s body.

Paul writes in the indicative: “You are the body of Christ.”

The church doesn’t always get that right. There’s a newsflash. We are two thousand years and 41,000 denominations removed from Paul’s admonition to be Christ’s body...and yet even in our division and disagreement, at least the Church has someone who calls us to a common purpose; or, as Paul put it, someone in Jesus Christ who calls us to a more excellent way.

Our culture could learn something from the church, because we need a more excellent way. The way we have been going just isn’t going to cut it. There is nothing excellent about waiting for one political ideology to win out over another. There is nothing excellent about using people, or support for the armed forces, or aid to rural farmers as bargaining chips for legislators to score small victories. There is nothing excellent about dividing the citizens of this country into stronger and stronger opposition because it sells books, and drives ratings.

I have, for a long time, been interested in understanding what the root of our polarized culture might be. It is not news that people of good intelligence and intentions disagree. Democracy is based on the fruit of vigorous debate and competing ideas. But when it seems that almost every news headline is a reason for people on both sides of the political divide to take up arms and charge into battle, it is cause for alarm.

We've seen more evidence of division in our country this week.

Tuesday, as the Supreme Court heard oral arguments for a case involving the legalization of same-sex marriage, crowds of people gathered on the front steps of the court in shouting at to one another. Recent polling suggests that while opinion is shifting, almost half of us hold a different conviction than the almost other half.

45 miles east of Washington DC, protests raged in Baltimore. It is a shame that the story is so familiar: six police officers (three black and three white), in arresting an African-American suspect named Freddy Gray, used force that resulted in Gray's death. This tragedy, heaped upon the news of Ferguson, Missouri, and Charleston, SC provided a spark to an already smoldering fire that flared in the streets and was covered (incessantly) by our 24-hour news.

For some, what happened in Baltimore was one more piece of evidence of an unaddressed inequality that is playing itself out in the criminal-justice system in our country. For others, the response of citizens in Baltimore is further evidence of a lack of respect for the rule of law and authority.

How did we get here?

I recently read a fascinating book called *The Righteous Mind* by a psychologist named Jonathan Haidt. Haidt suggests that there are three main drivers that shape our moral choices and political preferences and that help explain how and why our society has become so fragmented.

The first is to understand that when it comes to deciding what is right, our brains are – as Haidt puts it – like a tongue with six taste receptors. Just as some of us have a preference for sweet foods and others of us for salty ones, there are six different criteria by our brains judge whether something is morally sound. Haidt lists the six criteria as: care, fairness, loyalty, liberty, authority, and purity. All of our brains contain these six receptors, but we all have preferences. Some of us accentuate fairness (and justice) over and above authority. Others of us raise purity over that of fairness. The point is that one reason we have such a hard time understanding why a person who holds an opposite view just doesn't get it, is because their brain is wired differently when it comes to making moral decisions and judgments. Making a moral argument that appeals to authority (and the rule of law) isn't going to be convincing to a person whose main filter is fairness.

A second observation by Haidt is that what generally drives people is their intuition and not their reasoning. His metaphor for this is to consider ourselves – and everyone around us – as riders on top of a very large elephant. The elephant is our intuition – which takes us where it wants to go, and most of the time, our reasoning serves to justify our intuitions. It is probably easy for us to imagine someone we know whose elephant has led them to some pretty strange places and who thought

they were completely justified in being there. What is more difficult is to ask if our own elephants tend to lead us to the same place time and again – and to examine what we have said about our reasons.

The third point Haidt makes is that as human beings, we are primarily selfish, but also have a capacity to be a part of a whole. As he puts it, we are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee. Most of time we give into self-interest, but some of the time we can transcend the self and participate with the hive.

What I so appreciate about Haidt’s work is not that he provides an answer for how to move beyond our division, but rather he gives a framework for understanding why we are divided. And more, he helps us practice patience with one another by shedding light on the different ways we arrive at our conclusions.

+ + +

I believe as the church of Jesus Christ that we have an opportunity to model to the world around us what it means to live as a people who disagree. More and more, I think if the church can do that, it will offer not just a model for how people can get along, but a witness to the God who knits us together as one body.

The church is no stranger to the division that we see evidenced in our culture. It is important to remember that the church has never been a stranger to division. The events that accentuated our country’s disagreements this week are felt inside the walls of this sanctuary as well.

As you may know, the Session has initiated a time of discussion and discernment around the issue of same-sex marriage. Our congregation has intentionally avoided being defined by any issue of the day – and that will remain the case. Yet, with a change in state law and our denomination giving each congregation’s Session the responsibility of defining marriage, we must engage with one another and make a decision. This week we sent an invitation to participate in this conversation in two ways: by attending a series of four Wednesday evening educational events where we will look at the issue through the lens of Scripture, our theological tradition, our reason, and our experience, and (two) by writing the Session a letter – addressed to the church – where you can share your thoughts, perspective, or a personal story that is related to this important aspect in our life of faith.

I would encourage you to participate in both of these ways: through study and prayer, and through sharing your thoughts and experiences with the Session.

Here is my fervent hope – a hope that I believe to be grounded in scripture and in the good news of the gospel: that as we engage matters around which we all do not agree...which may lead us to reach conclusions around which there is not unanimous consent...we would remember what is central.

How did Jesus say it?

I am the vine, you are branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing.

We are a church that has differing opinions.
Our brains may be wired in such a way that leads us to arrive at different conclusions when we read the same scriptures.

The challenge is that we stay close to the vine.
The challenge is that we love Jesus more than our opinions.
Because we are the body of Christ.

+++