



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What Now?

Isaiah 65:17-25; I Timothy 2:1-6; Acts 4:32-37

I often remind you that, as Christians, the most important thing we do in life is worship God. Each week, we spend a lot of time planning and preparing for our time of worship. Earlier last week, I sent Mark information about the order of worship and the sermon and asked that he send me the service music he had chosen. On Thursday, he wrote back and said that he was thinking about playing a festive toccata on "Hail to the Chief." I responded by saying that I was certain some folks would enjoy hearing it but that I had also had several requests for the choir to do a repeat performance of "Come, Ye Disconsolate."

I want you to know that this worship service was planned on Tuesday afternoon, before the polls closed and any returns were reported. My thought was that no matter who would be elected on Tuesday night, some people would be elated while others would be dejected, even devastated. I was not wrong. Today some people are happily humming "Hail to the Chief" while others are the disconsolate looking for some consolation.

There is no question that Tuesday's election result was a surprise. Pollsters and pundits, the people who make their living off of political contests, were taken by surprise and, by their admission, miscalculated what they thought would be the outcome of the Presidential election. Regardless of which candidate you supported, I daresay few of you thought that Mr. Trump would actually win.

Obviously there have been very strong reactions to the election of our new President. Protests have erupted throughout the country and, sadly, some of them have turned violent. Dismay and fear have been expressed by people of color, immigrants, women, and Muslims. One young lady sent me a message which I think expresses the feeling of many people: "I don't know what to do," she cried.

As I said, worship is the most important thing we do as Christians. It is our opportunity to offer praise and thanksgiving to God and to speak our needs and fears as we offer our prayers. It is also a time to listen to God

speak to us. There is, however, a second aspect of worship that is equally important for us. Worship is the most important thing we do as we glorify God *and* it informs and influences everything else we do as people of faith. Church projects, missions, education, committee work, stewardship, outreach, and personal devotion all grow out of our experience of worship. When I was growing up, the order of worship in my home church always had as the very last line the words: "End of worship; beginning of service." Our worship informs and prepares us to take our faith out into the world.

No matter who had won last Tuesday's election, some of us, perhaps even all of us, would have waked up Wednesday morning confessing, "I don't know what to do." The question before us now as a sadly divided nation and as people of faith is: What now? What do we do now?

There are several key things that we must keep in mind. First, no matter who our elected leaders are, we must maintain perspective about who is really in charge. Two months before the election, Pastor Blake McKinney wrote,

If Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Gary Johnson, Jill Stein or anyone else is elected President of the United States, Jesus Christ will still be Lord of the universe.

...

Do you really think God is pacing around heaven right now, saying, 'Oh, me, if this election doesn't work out, what am I going to do?' No, what God says is, 'At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Philippians 2:10-11).¹

For all of the statements of faith and affirmations that exist across the spectrum of Christian belief, one is singularly universal: Jesus Christ is Lord. This is not a political sermon other than the fact that it has to do with matters that concern the people. Two thousand years ago, however, the affirmation, "Jesus Christ is Lord," was taken as a political statement because all citizens and subjects of Rome were supposed to affirm, "Caesar is Lord." The confession of Christ as Lord could get one beaten, thrown in jail, or killed, and not necessarily in that order. To this day, however, "Jesus Christ is Lord" is our singular confession of faith and rings far louder than either "Make America

¹Blake McKinney, "Getting Some Perspective This Election Season," *EthicsDaily.com* (September 29, 2016); available online at: <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/getting-some-perspective-this-election-season-cms-23656>.

Great Again" or "Stronger Together." We must not forget that God in Christ still holds authority over all of life.

Second, we need to keep in mind God's perspective on the things we do as citizens of earth. William Buchanan, the Pastor of the Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, stated, "God is neither Democrat, nor Republican . . . We've attempted to place God on one side or the other of this political battle. But if God is Republican, or if God is Democrat, then we have reduced God to humanity . . . Humanity has its frailties, has its weaknesses. We have made God like us."²

Moses fought this battle long ago in the desert of Sinai when the Hebrew people created an idol to worship while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God. We cannot reduce God to our particular interests and desires. However, we do know that God cares about our interests and desires and chose to insert himself in our lives through Jesus Christ, God with us. Jesus came to reveal God to us; therefore, we dare not define God by our politics, theology, biases, or presumptions. God is above and beyond our politics but has some very definite things to say about how we relate to one another in community. We call that the Gospel.

A third admonition comes from Dennis Bickers, an author and consultant to churches. He reminds us that scripture commands us to pray for the people who have some authority over us. Paul wrote to Timothy and said, "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior" (I Timothy 2:1-3). Whether or not you voted for him, come January 20, Mr. Trump will be our President. He and all of our leaders, regardless of who they are, need our prayers.

Rev. Bickers offers two additional things to keep in mind: one, "God does not fly on Air Force One" and, two, "salvation does not come out of Washington, D.C."³

So, remembering that God has ultimate authority over life on earth, that God will not be boxed in by human categories, and that we must pray for our leaders, what do we do now that a new President has been elected?

²William Buchanan as cited in Baptist Center for Ethics, "Discussion Guide for Golden Rule Politics: Reclaiming the Rightful Role of Faith in Politics"; available online at www.ethicsdaily.com.

³Dennis Bickers, "Why This Election Brings Out the Worst in Christians," *EthicsDaily.com* (August 17, 2016); available online at: <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/why-this-election-brings-out-the-worst-in-christians-cms-23588>.

God's promises never were intended for a select group of people, although the Hebrews who settled in the Promised Land thought so. God's invitation to Abram to inhabit a land unknown to him was a promise to create a nation of people who would be a blessing to all the people of the world. Jesus told his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20a). Isaiah captured this promise in his image of what we know as the "peaceable kingdom," where God's abundance is available to everyone and peace and harmony reign over all the earth (Isaiah 65:17-25). It is indeed a glorious and compelling vision, one which John echoed in his vision in Revelation and which our choir so beautifully conveyed a few minutes ago.

Yet, Isaiah never saw this dream realized. Jesus, who came to make this dream a reality, never saw it realized. In fact, it has never happened, at least not globally, and at least not yet. It does occur in certain places at particular times whenever people put down their physical, verbal, and emotional weapons long enough to see one another as brothers and sisters. The fulfillment of the dream is very much possible, but it depends on us, not God. God has done his part.

As Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles, in the Early Church, unity was the first order of the day despite significant differences which threatened to divide the nascent believers. The first Christians were a mix of Jews and Gentiles, culturally and religiously very different. Disputes soon arose over whether or not widows and orphans of both groups were receiving the care they needed. Skirmishes over circumcision and dietary laws hampered their ability to carry out the commission Jesus had left with them. Merely weeks and months away from Jesus' death and resurrection, they struggled with how to get along and create a new and different community based on faith rather than human preferences.

The first believers had heard Jesus speak. They had seen him and known him and literally followed him from town to town. Still, they struggled to find unity among themselves but did so by focusing first on the needs of the most vulnerable among them and second on the worth and dignity of each other.

We have to do the same. Partisan politics cannot divide the Body of Christ. That does not mean that we cannot differ on ideas, policies, and programs that are implemented in our communities. We have different

perspectives and varying ideas about what would be best for our community and nation, but these things should not push us apart. Instead, we ought to share them with one another, talk about the possibilities they offer, and decide together which ideas are best for us all. That is the nature of a democracy, but more than that, it is the character of a community of faith.

We cannot allow politics to divide us. In fact, it ought to be the other way around. Our unity in Christ ought to drive our politics! What we believe and understand to be God's guidance in our lives ought to influence how we think and act in the world. If not, we have a serious problem. If the Gospel, which we have studied and reflected on and incorporated into our lives does not influence what we do in the world, we have a problem indeed!

Like the people in the Early Church, we also have to look out for the people around us who are most vulnerable. Widows and orphans and people who do not have family support need the help of the larger community to sustain themselves. Welcoming the stranger in the land, a consistent theme throughout scripture, is as critical today as it was thousands of years ago. God has never turned his back on immigrants, minorities, or people considered to be different—and neither should we.

I understand that had the election gone the other way last Tuesday, many people would have been afraid of the possible changes that might have occurred under a Clinton administration: ramped up immigration, irresponsible trade deals, the loss of long-held values, increased taxation, or the import of terrorism. We have to take those fears seriously. I also know that today people are harboring real fears. Parents of children who are gay are scared for their safety and well-being. Black and brown people fear increased discrimination and lack of protection. Women are concerned that they will have fewer opportunities in the future and a greater chance of assault. Children of illegal immigrants are afraid their parents will be deported. Muslims are fearful of retaliation for actions around the world committed by people who do not actually follow the teaching of Islam.

What now? What do we do now that a new President has been elected? We do what we hopefully have been doing all along: we stand up for, defend, protect, and care for people who are vulnerable and marginal in our community and nation.

What now? The Church must truly become a catalyst for unity here in our city and throughout our nation. In Sunday School a few weeks ago, as we discussed some of these very issues, one member mentioned that when she

encounters someone with whom she disagrees, she listens to them. She listens to their story and their fears. She tries to understand why and how they arrived at the opinions they hold. By listening and understanding, she gains respect for them, even though she may still differ with them in many ways. By listening and understanding, we learn the other person. We also learn something about ourselves and our own need to change and grow.

What now? Keep doing what you have been doing all along. Provide shelter and food and encouragement to people who are homeless. Offer safety and support to victims of domestic abuse. Love children and provide them with opportunities to learn and grow. Continue to fight hunger with food and compassionate policies. Battle illness and disease through healthier living and support of research. Help other people conquer loneliness and fear by being a good friend and removing some of the shadows from life. Follow the mandate spoken by the prophet Micah who said, "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Last week, singer, composer, poet, Jew, and sometime Buddhist priest Leonard Cohen died. Cohen wrote and sang gritty, earthy, iridescent songs about life. One of his most famous songs, recorded by many other singers, is titled "Anthem." Written in 1992, the lyrics are as pertinent today as they were over two decades ago. Listen to the first stanza of the song and see if it feels familiar. Listen to the refrain and see if it offers some hope.

The birds they sang at the break of day.
Start again, I heard them say.
Don't dwell on what has passed away
Or what is yet to be.
Yeah the wars they will be fought again,
The holy dove, she will be caught again.
Bought and sold and bought again,
The dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.⁴

We have been reminded over and over throughout the past eighteen months or so that our political system is cracked in many ways. It is not a perfect system. There is no perfect candidate. And there are no perfect

⁴Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," *The Future*, Columbia, 1992.

voters. We all have our own cracks and fissures, our dents and imperfections. We are, after all, clay vessels.

Yet, when those cracks occur, God has an opportunity to shine the light of his love through our usually thick armor. The cracks allow us to see one another more honestly and to let others see who we really are. The cracks allow God to get inside us and change us.

No matter who might have won the Presidential election last week, the system was cracked. We know that. God sees that. So God shines his light and helps us to see it as well in hopes that we will do something positive about it. When cracks occur, we can be the mirrors, the reflectors of the light, helping to illumine rather than highlight.

Last summer, during our Summer Community Worship Series, Mary Harris Todd, Pastor of Morton Memorial Presbyterian Church, preached what I heard was a very fine sermon. I did not have a chance to read it until last week. I agree it was a wonderful sermon.

Drawing on Jeremiah's letter to people in exile in Babylon, Rev. Todd points out how difficult it was for people who were so far away from home to consider settling permanently in their new homes and seeking the peace of that enemy city. Jeremiah urged them to make the most of the place where they found themselves living and to seek the peace of that land—its *shalom*, its welfare and wholeness. Make a difference where you are, he said, not where you long to be.

Today, we may or may not be in the nation we long for. Our country may or may not have the leaders we desire. But it is our country, this land of liberty. What now? We pray. We participate. We ask questions. We offer answers. We find common ground. We welcome all people who come. We protect the vulnerable. We battle injustice. We resist evil. We promote the good. We love one another as God has loved us. That's what we do. Amen.

November 13, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

There are times, O God, when we wish that we had the imagination of Isaiah. What a magnificent vision he had of a world in which there was abundance for everyone, with harmony and good will as the order of the day! He never lived to see wolves and lambs dining together, nor have we. There is so much need in our world that we cannot imagine a banquet table which feeds all people. There is so much discord that we can hardly envision a time when the worth and dignity of all people are honored and kind words instead of angry insults are offered to the people around us and around the world.

Isaiah never saw his vision realized, but he never gave up on the hope you offered his people, O God. Forgive us for giving up, for letting go, and for living beneath the calling you have offered to us.

We are a diverse and wonderful nation, gifted in so many ways, blessed beyond measure. We are a haven for people who have no safe home, for dreamers who see what the rest of us cannot, and for souls who cherish freedom because they know what captivity is like. But we are a divided nation, O God, an attitude that defies everything you call us to be as your people. We have forgotten kindness and civility. We have ignored the cries of people on the margins. We have failed to remember that everyone of us is a citizen of this great land and that no one of us has greater or lesser rights than another. We have neglected neighborliness and misplaced generosity.

But thanks be to you, O God, that the sun has never failed to rise for the beginning of another day and you have never given up on us, your children, created in your image. Forgive us and heal us, we pray. Open our eyes to the commonalities we share. Open our hearts to the kinship that is ours. Open our hands to greet one another as the brothers and sisters that we are. Open our lives to share the richness of life you have placed within each one of us.

Give us a renewed vision, O God, that reflects the hope Isaiah saw. Grant us a new energy and a new sense of community that will overcome our divisions and unite us as a people who share so much in common. Grant us, as people of faith, the heart of your Son, our Brother, our Lord.

For all of the other needs of body, spirit, and mind, we seek your help and grace. Comfort our grieving souls and soothe our weary hearts. Bless those who stand in the breach for us, who serve this country bravely in so many ways, and who sacrifice all on our behalf. Lift up our spirits, O God, and continue to invite us to partner in ministry with you. Remind us that you hold us all in the embrace of your redeeming love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.