

WGUMC October 7, 2018 World Communion Sunday  
“What Would Jesus Say About the Divisions in Our Country?”  
Matthew 5:33-47

This week, my first words have to come from God’s Word: “How long must I bear pain in my soul?...How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” [Ps 13:2] “How long must your servant endure?” [Ps 119:84] “How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” [Prov 1:22]

I don’t know how many times I’ve said to myself in the past few years that things couldn’t get worse. But every week we seem to hit a new low. I’m not sure how much more I can take. Our country seems to be breaking up, and the partisanship is tearing me apart. This week I’ve had trouble getting to sleep. And even when I did, I worried in my dreams. How long, O Lord, indeed! And I’m not the only one who is praying, “Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.” [Ps 44:26]

We look to the Bible for comfort and guidance in contentious times. And there is wise counsel here. Both the Hebrew Bible and

the New Testament assure us that God is above it all. “Take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality....” [2 Chron 19:7] The Apostle Peter says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” [Acts 10:34] And Paul repeats those same words in Romans [2:11], Galatians [2:6], and Ephesians [6:9].

These passages proclaim that, unlike us, God is an impartial judge. Nevertheless, there are other verses in the Bible that prove that God could never be confirmed to the Supreme Court. The powerful would say God is too partisan, for when it comes to conflicts between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the unrighteous and the righteous, God takes sides. “...for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” [Ps 1:6] “‘Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now rise up,’ says the Lord.” [Ps 12:5] “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the

lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” [Luke 1:53]

In many places in the Bible, we see God taking sides with those who have no power, which is why we like to think of ourselves as the underdogs in every fight. We want to be certain that God is on our side and not the other side.

What is hard for us to admit is that we don't get to determine where the power lines fall. We can't be so sure that God is on our side. In the midst of the Civil War, someone asked Abraham Lincoln if he thought God was on the Union side. He said, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.”

You could describe the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' attempt to get us on God's side. For instance, though it seems stupid to us, Jesus tells us to love our enemies, because that's what God does. Jesus says that God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good. God sends the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. In other

words, God throws love indiscriminately all over the place, whether we like it or not.

I was at Westhope Presbyterian Church in Saratoga on Wednesday, walking a labyrinth, meditating on this passage, and wouldn't you know it, it started to rain on me. The rain was surely a blessing, but its falling on me was no proof that I am among the righteous—or the unrighteous, for that matter. I kept walking and the wetter I got, the more the truth had a chance to soak in: I am both—righteous and unrighteous.

With that realization, I could begin to hear what Jesus would say about the divisions in our country. What we often fail to understand is that the dividing lines don't fall between us and them, between blacks and whites, between the rich and the poor, between the young and the old, between women and men, between Democrats and Republicans. The dividing line between good and evil, between the just and unjust, runs right down the middle of the heart of every one of us. The divisions we see in our country were not created by

politicians or foreign agents meddling on social media, only exploited by them. The divisions were already there inside of us. So, the question for this morning is: what would Jesus say to us?

Remember the first thing that both John the Baptist and Jesus said to us? “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” It is always time to repent, to turn around. But after the past few weeks, I’m not sure how we’re supposed to do that. It seems as if the farther down this road of division we go, the harder it is to turn back.

John preached a baptism of repentance. Baptism is a ritual of turning back, cleaning the slate and starting again. Every religion has its rituals of cleansing. Judaism has the mikvah, the ritual bath. Islam has *wudu* and *ghusl*. Buddhists have the *tsukubai*, a basin for washing. Hindus have the Ganges River. The Cherokee have a practice called “going to water.” I don’t know about you, but to me, politics feels so incredibly dirty these days, and I believe it would do all of us good if we declared a national day of mourning so we could all “go to water” and wash our political sins away.

Yes, it would be a good thing if we could wash the dirt away, but we can't keep it away. Jesus did not try to keep away from the divisiveness in his world. He loved sinners and poor fishermen, lepers and Samaritans, tax collectors and questionable women. And his radical love made him some powerful enemies. But instead of living in a bubble as so many of us do, surrounded by folk who think like we do, Jesus engaged his enemies. He didn't have to go to Jerusalem; he chose to go. And there, he spoke truth to power.

Jesus called one prominent political party, the Pharisees, a brood of vipers. [Matthew 23:32] He called the temple, which was the headquarters of the priestly party, a den of robbers. [Matthew 21:13] In all the power struggles going on in Jerusalem in his day, Jesus didn't hesitate to take sides.

But he never ever gave up his humanity trying to take down the other side. He didn't make false accusations or peddle wild conspiracy theories. He chose his words carefully and warned us to do so as well. Don't swear falsely. Always tell the truth. Let your yes

be yes. Let your no be no. If you say anything more than that, you are a mouthpiece for evil. [Matthew 5:33-37] This describes social media pretty well, doesn't it? A mouthpiece for evil and a major source of our divisions today. So before you post or share or tweet, ask yourself, "Does this pass the Jesus test?" Is this the truth? For we cannot make one hair white or black. Honestly, truth is usually gray, and we'd be a lot better off if we could live with that.

Most of the news was pretty bad this week, but I did hear some good news. Rev. Dr. William Barber won a MacArthur Genius Award. Barber, my classmate in seminary, is a Disciples of Christ pastor, former head of the NAACP of North Carolina and the Moral Mondays movement, founder of Repairers of the Breach and leader in the recently relaunched Poor People's Campaign. More than anyone else today, he is channeling the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King.

I listened to him while I was on leave. In one sermon, Barber was talking about the snake line, the altitude above which snakes do not live. Remembering what Jesus said about the Pharisees being a

brood of vipers, Barber says that we have to live above the snake line. Now, I checked and found out that rattlesnakes can actually live at pretty high altitudes and apparently political snakes can, too. But Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount says that we can and we must live even higher. So don't just love those who love you. Love those snakes, too. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

To me, the real difference between Jesus and the rest of us is that, though he got angry, he didn't stoop low enough to hate his enemies. When he arrived in Jerusalem, he wept for them. [Matthew 23:37] When one of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, came to him under the cover of night, he shared the gospel with him. [John 3:16] When the soldiers were nailing him to the cross and the crowd was mocking him, he forgave them, because he loved them. [Luke 23:34] To be more precise, he loved what was of God in them.

If we want to mend the divisions in this country, we have to start around the dinner table, the Thanksgiving table. That member



of the family that is on the opposite end of the political spectrum from us, the one who posts all those angry articles, those demeaning cartoons, on Facebook, and sends the message intentionally or unintentionally, that anyone who disagrees with them is less than human. Before we block them, remember that something of God is in them. That raises a question: By blocking their posts are we blocking them, too? And are we blocking the opportunity to see what is of God in them and to grow it?

This is our chance to be ambassadors for Christ and ministers of reconciliation? [2 Cor 5:18-20] So we have to ask ourselves, have we ever really tried to reach them? Can we think of a way respectfully, lovingly, to engage them? Can we look past the politics, past their social media posts, and respond to the fear and the hurt that is motivating them? Pushing aside the ugliness that fear brings out in them and in us, can't we see the beauty, the glimmers of God, that are still there in each and every one of us? Can't we try to love that glimmer, however faint, they begin to glow?

We come to the table confessing the truth that by ourselves, we can't do anything about the divisions in our country or world except exacerbate them. On our own, we really can't love our enemies. But if we can accept the fact that Christ loves us—that he loved us even when we were enemies of God [Rom 5:10]—then we can let Christ love our enemies *through* us. This is the way the division ends. This is the way the world begins again.

To “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” simply means for each of us to get our own fear out of the way, so we can become channels of God's perfect love. Love says to everyone in the whole world, “Come to the table. Receive the grace to let go of your fear. And let me love you until all of your divisions become meaningless and disappear.” This is my prayer.