

Sunday, May 15, 2022 Sermon

Presented by: Jonelle Ocloo

“Us and them.” In our Scripture reading today from Acts chapter 11, Simon Peter shared something that he learned. He says: “The Spirit told me ... **not to make a distinction between them and us.**” Us and them.

Prior to this vision, Peter made a distinction between “us” which was for him the Jewish people, and “them” meaning the Gentiles / the non-Jews. In Acts 11, we see that Peter is surprised that the Gentile believers got the Holy Spirit just like he and the other Jewish believers had. I can imagine that Peter thought... *You mean God has given them his Holy Spirit like He has given to us?*

We see Peter’s thought process when he questions:

.... *“If then God gave them the same gift that He gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ who ... was I that I could hinder God?”* (Acts 11:17)

... *“Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”* (Acts 11:18)

Like Peter, in our society today, we also commonly make distinctions between “us and them”. In America today, our distinctions between “us and them” cut across different lines: whether they are socio-economic distinctions; or distinctions of race, color, or ethnicity; religious or denominational distinctions; or distinctions that place us in various ideological or political tribes.

Based on our political distinctions, some of us may wonder as Peter did in today’s Scripture reading: Then God has given even to the people on the Right or the people on the Left, the repentance that leads to life? You mean the people on the other end of the political spectrum believe God too???

- Someone who is pro-life may wonder: You mean those people who don’t regard the life of the unborn babies have the same gift ... they also have the repentance that leads to life?
- Someone who is pro-choice may wonder: You mean those people who don’t regard the reproductive freedom of women have the same gift ..they also have the repentance that leads to life?

Let us be careful not to vilify “them” (whoever that is in relation to “us”), or regard them as uninformed, insensitive, or even downright evil because they happen to view every weighty issues from a different perspective.

The ongoing culture wars in America have become especially heated of late. Public health officials and election officials face threats just for doing their jobs to keep us safe during a pandemic, or to ensure that all votes are counted during an election. Just this past week, our governor had to call on law enforcement to protect the homes of supreme court justices after protestors picketed the homes of these justices following the leaked draft of a Supreme Court decision. The White House press secretary revealed that she and her family received threats including texts with her home address and the names of her children.

Sadly some have taken it upon ourselves to judge people and the legitimacy of their Christian faith based on what their political views are.

I have often thought about the original disciples who physically walked with Jesus when He was on earth. I wonder what Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector thought of each other – for surely they came from different ends of the political spectrum in their day. I image Simon the Zealot and Matthew may at times have looked at the other, and thought in their minds *What, he’s in with Jesus? Jesus called him as a disciple?* Matthew may have looked at Simon, the Zealot, and thought: *but he is a radical who sought to bring down the government and sow disorder in society?* Likewise, Simon the Zealot may have looked at Matthew the Tax Collector and thought: *Here is a man who colludes with the Roman oppressors. How could Jesus have called someone who compromises his faith by stealing from his own people to line his pockets while helping the Roman occupation?* For all we know, it is possible that these two apostles who held opposing political views may have disagreed with each other as vehemently as pro-choice or pro-life Americans disagree today, yet they both followed Jesus. I wonder if one of the reasons Judas might have betrayed Jesus is because he was disillusioned with how Jesus was handling the political situation. Did Judas ever think: *I thought Jesus was supposed to rid us of these Roman oppressors? I thought Jesus was supposed to restore the glory of Israel. He is not supporting the agenda or political issue that I think he should get behind.*

So then how does someone know that we are Christians? What is the outward sign of the inner transformation / spiritual rebirth that has occurred in us? How will someone know that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, that is a Christian? Is it by your political stance? Is it because you are pro-life? Or Pro choice? Is it because you stand for social justice or reparations? Is it because you support Black Lives Matter or stand with Blue Lives Matter.

Jesus gave us the answer when he said: *“Men will know you are my disciples by the way you love each other.”* It is by the outward action of our love for one another. He didn't say anything about it having to do with what opinions we hold, what political party we belong to.

Jesus says people will know we are Christ followers by the way we LOVE other Christ followers.

When we look for Jesus, the Church, or our faith to solve the political problems or issues of the day , we may be gravely disappointed. Not because God is not able. For we know that nothing is impossible for God. But rather because what God is doing in and through the church is way bigger than winning an election, controlling the legislature, or even appointing Supreme Court justices. I wonder that when Christians try to get the upper hand politically, are we rather diminishing what the Kingdom of God is? Remember: non-believers are looking at us (Christians) and sometimes what they are seeing is not good. When people see a self-proclaimed Christian, saying hurtful or hateful things to someone, or rip into other people on t.v.,in the papers, or online rather than advancing the cause of Christ, it ends up tarnishing the Christian witness. So before we make that post on Facebook or Twitter, may we pray as the Psalmist did: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”* (Psalm 139:23-24)

If we truly believe that Jesus is about love, grace, mercy, then we should acknowledge that it is not compatible to speak about Christians with whom you disagree in a derogatory or disdainful manner. People are not stupid or evil because they see life or the issues of the day from a different perspective.

Let's be careful to not condemn people who feel, think, or believe differently. Let's show love for other believers who are not within your circle, especially Christians that you disagree with. How do we show love? Let's start with: don't outwardly question their Christian faith because of their views or positions. Let's realize that no matter what your point of view, people (of faith) can feel very strongly about it -- for or against it.

I am grateful when we celebrate the Holy Eucharist together. Christ implores us to remember Him in the breaking of the Bread. When each week, we share the body and blood of Christ together, we declare that we are one in him. We, of different tribes, are one. We, of different views, are one. We are unified with and as Christians from across the political spectrum, as well as Christians from around the globe, and across time.

When together we help a refugee family from Afghanistan, we show our love for our neighbor as Jesus commanded us to. When together we provide food for families at the Route 1 shelter or at Grassroots we are presenting an offering to our Lord Jesus. For what we have done for the least of these, we have done for our Lord Jesus. These are just some of the ways that we show LOVE for each other. Perhaps you also have ideas about how to show love to each other. Maybe your ideas are different from my ideas. Nevertheless, we can still listen to each other, break bread together, serve our community together, and love one another.

Amen