

“Courage to be Changed”

Philippians 2:1-5

January 8, 2020

**“Let each of you look not your own interests,
but to the interests of others...”**

Philippians 2:4

Pastor Andy Kinsey

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, open our eyes, our ears, our hearts to the reality of the truth of your gospel: help us to turn away from the spiritual forces of wicked, to reject the evil powers of this work, and so repent of our sins: in Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Message

I believe Mark Twain said, “History does not repeat itself, but it certainly does rhyme.” Mark Twain also said, “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.”¹

I share these words from one of our greatest literary figures in American history to echo sentiments of what I am thinking at this moment. There is a whole gamut of emotions as well, feelings of being assaulted. Grief. Dealing with a sense of national humiliation at the desecration of and attack on the US Capitol. And this is on top of one of the worst weeks in the pandemic!

What occurred in Washington D.C. on Wednesday has only made me realize my own need to deal with the “acid of my own anger and sadness” and expose it the light and love of Christ, seeking forgiveness and repenting of sin, as I – like you – come to grips with the reality of what is happening.

I share this confession as I sense more and more the opening of a very large chasm in our nation – an abyss that can swallow us, if we allow it. Even before the events of Wednesday, I personally had deep concerns.

It is why, I think, it is ironic (even providential?) that January 6th was also the Day of the Feast of the Epiphany, when the Magi met the Christ Child, that the light of God would reveal such darkness in plain sight, which is what God’s light

¹ Quotes by Mark Twain are readily available online.

always does (Mt. 2:1-12). Indeed, I am haunted by the words of Abraham Lincoln, echoing Jesus that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” (Mk. 3:25).

And yet, even more so: what concerns me, as a leader, as a pastor, is how we seem to find so many different ways of understanding, or even denying, the truth! We cannot even agree on what the facts are anymore, even when they are in plain sight! And I ask myself: what happens when we drink from so many fountains of “untruth,” from so many difference sources of information?

A colleague and friend of mine from Southern Methodist University, Steve Long, has written a book about living in a “post-truth society.” That is, as long as I can say something is untrue and get you to believe what I say, regardless of the evidence or the lack thereof, I can act without a sense of shame or consequence of what I say.² How are we going to form a “more perfect union” as we move forward, when so folks seem to be living in completely different moral universes?

On so many levels, I simply seek to find the right words today: this country, which I love, and which you love as well, has been a beacon of hope to so many. People from around the world look to it in times of crisis.

But now, it is in crisis; there is a reckoning. The attack did not come from without; it came from within. As Martin Luther King wrote, we have to address, as painfully as they are, the “open sores” of our wounded-ness, our contempt, not with Band-Aids, but with the radical healing and just medicine of the gospel, knowing full well that where there is deep love, there is also deep disappointment.³

We all, as citizens, as *Christians* no less, have very serious work to do in repairing the brokenness, the mistrust, and, yes, the hatred. The work before us to restore the damage will not be easy, but it begins with all of us by looking into the mirror.

After all, the human endeavor of politics can only take us so far. As the Scriptures remind, us, we are flawed and broken people who stand in need of God’s grace (Rom. 3:23). We all look through glass darkly, never having sole possession of the truth, but always in search of it, even as we are guided by it (1 Cor. 13:9). We walk by faith, and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:14).

² D. Stephen Long, *Truth Telling in a Post-Truth World* (Nashville TN: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2019), 4.

³ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963.

Indeed, the gospel message, as revealed in the Scriptures, and as understood throughout the history of the church, is that we cannot have justice and reconciliation without repentance; and we cannot have repentance without confession; where there is no confession, there is no possibility for truth.⁴

Hence, the importance of what we say and how we say it. Hence, the importance of facing reality, naming fear. Hence, the need to step back and not allow the acid of anger to control us – or, to do no more harm!

Henri Nouwen, the great Roman Catholic priest, says it a little differently, but also very importantly as well, when he writes, “One of the main tasks of theology is to find words that do not divide but unite, that do not create conflict but unity; that do not hurt but heal.”⁵

One of the lessons, I hope, we learned in Sunday school is that words *do* matter. We learned, hopefully, the importance of moral character and virtue. We learned, hopefully, the implications of our rhetoric in how it can influence others. We learned, hopefully, the commandments of “Do not steal,” “Do no lie.”⁶

My humble attempt this morning is to find a language that is both soul-searching and truth seeking.

The Scripture

It is why I debated with whether or not to shift the focus and topic completely for today. After all, there is so much happening. Maybe, I thought, we should go off course and take another route. Maybe more analysis.

But I thought: “No. We are talking about Paul’s letter to the Philippians and *the courage to be changed*. Not the courage to go out and change others, but the courage, the vulnerability, as Pastor Jenothy shared last week, to allow God’s grace to transform us, as we seek to renew our baptismal commitment to Christ, which certainly, as I understand it, does not exclude restoring trust and justice and decency in this land.”⁷

Indeed, when I went back and read the passage for today, I realized that these words, chosen weeks ago, can speak to us to the kind of people Christ calls us to be in a moment where there is uncertainty about the future and turmoil in the

⁴ Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Comprise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2019), 15.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 1979), 88.

⁶ See Exodus 20:3-21.

⁷ See Pastor Jenothy Irvine’s sermon “The Courage to Be Vulnerable” (January 3, 2021) at www.franklingrace.org.

present. And I can only pray that *by God's Holy Spirit*, they will address us at a level that prompts us all to live out our vocation as followers of Christ; that they may remind us *as the church yet again* of what it means to live out the commands of God. Hear now *these words* together:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:1-5).

God's Word for God's People! Thanks be to God!

Reflection

“Do not do anything out of selfish ambition or conceit. Regard others better than yourself. Do not look to your own interests, but keep in front of you the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4).

Note Paul's assumption: we share in a common life, in a common good together. When we act out of selfish ambition or conceit, when we fail to act with humility (thinking we possess the whole truth), when we think we can act as if our actions and words don't matter – we fail to serve the common good, the “interest of others.”

And what Paul says in this passage is that *it doesn't have to be this way*.

The English translation here is a little misleading, for what Paul is really saying in Greek goes something like this, or sounds like the following. It should sound more like *since* we have encouragement in Christ (and we have); *since* we have consolation, *since* we share in the life of the Spirit; and *since* there is compassion and sympathy in Jesus – *we can receive joy!* We can share in unity⁸

After all, God gives us *the grace to be changed* to live in this particular way! Not as some ideal, but as the “real” body of Christ, sharing the light of Christ!

⁸ Fred Craddock comments on the virtues in play in Paul's letter; see his commentary *Philippians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1985), 43.

Therefore, if I understand what Paul is saying, by practice and by attitude, we can really resist, and not succumb to, the “spiritual forces of wickedness,” to the false stories of nationalism and idolatry, violence and bigotry, of antisemitism.⁹

Indeed, as Christians, we know that these “forces” are preventable! There is a more excellent way, and it is the way of Christ, of love and righteousness (I Cor. 12:59)! As John Wesley and so many others have taught us, God’s grace, working on the human heart, can prevent us from such behavior.¹⁰ After all, once God’s grace moves in us, we can truly confess and realize *our need* to be changed.

Because as fearful as I feel we are at this moment, we need to allow the “better angels of our nature to emerge.”¹¹ We need to do no harm, do all the good we can, and stay in love with God.¹²

How do we, who claim to follow Christ, offer this kind of message amidst the turmoil? How do we offer more peace and not more shame, not more disgrace?

Even now, I recognize the challenge. Even now as I speak, I know that when I say “have no fear” that there is going to be fear, realizing that when I say words like “misinformation” or “false conspiracy theories,” a range of opinions immediately can surface. How do we move toward with a message of hope, to live in hope, even as we lament? In fact, what is our hope? What are you hoping for?

On Thursday, our son Caleb called and he and I talked about what is happening. It made me feel good that we could share because I know that in many families, there is conflict. In fact, he was asking me about how he could get more involved in his community.

As I reflect on our conversation, I realize that where *we* can begin to practice hope is where we already are! In our school boards, PTOs, city councils, non-profits, churches, neighborhoods. We need to realize that every action we take can contribute or not contribute to hope, to healing, to justice.

⁹ Fred Craddock comments on the virtues in play in Paul’s letter; see his commentary *Philippians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1985), 43.

¹⁰ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” in *John Wesley’s Fifty-Three Sermons*, edited by Edward H. Sugden (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 721ff; cf., Michael G. Cartwright with Andrew D. Kinsey, *Watching Over One Another in Love: Reclaiming the Wesleyan Rule of Life for the Church’s Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishing, 2011).

¹¹ The phrase “better angels of our nature” comes from Abraham Lincoln’s “First Inaugural Address” in March 1861.

¹² John Wesley, “The General Rules of the United Societies” in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Rupert E. Davies, Volume 9 of *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69ff.

And yet, I am not naïve. There are families, as I stated, even in our own congregation, whose divisions are real, as people seem to inhabit such different ways of seeing the world.

Closing Invitation

Dear friends, offering hope and truth across such chasms is doable, but it will stretch us. My prayer is that it won't break us.

Perhaps it is good, then, that we are remembering our baptisms today, that we are re-committing ourselves to be a people of hope, of courage, seeking to be the kind of people God calls us to be, speaking the truth in love (Gal. 5:6). That regardless of how or when we were baptized, we all can affirm together our common vows as believers:

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of our sin;
2. To accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.
3. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put our whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as our Lord.
4. To remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world.
5. To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and to do all in our power to strengthen its ministries, to uphold the Church by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.
6. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.¹³

These are the vows of our commitment to be changed unto the very likeness of Christ. Amen.

¹³ "The Baptismal Covenant" in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 86-94.