

Sunday, October 27, 2024
Pastor John McFadden
Please Don't Wag the Dog!
Jeremiah 31: 7-9

None of the great prophets could be called socially well-adjusted. The job description included being confrontational, offensive, and generally a pain in the rear end, especially to those with power and authority. Jeremiah did this for more than 50 years, and repeatedly suffered the consequences. Several attempts were made on his life, including being thrown into a cistern to starve to death. He is sometimes called the weeping prophet, and he had good reason to weep.

Much of his message could be summarized as "You have sinned, God is angry, and that is why things are bad and are going to get worse." Which is why he was never invited to speak at the Rotary Club. So, our text today is surprisingly positive and hopeful. The people of Israel had long been divided into two kingdoms: Judah, home of the city of Jerusalem, and the Northern Kingdom, home of nothing much in particular. But Jeremiah prophesied a day when God would gather the people together again. "See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those who labor; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back."

The image of God reuniting a divided nation struck a particular chord with me on the eve of a contentious election in a badly divided nation. One big difference, of course, is that Israel was divided by a foreign power, while we were able to divide ourselves without any help. If you believe, as I do, that God's will is for harmony, mutual respect, and goodwill towards all, it is an occasion to be deeply grieved that speaks of a sinful separation from one another and our God.

I am so old that I remember when Catholics and Protestants did not get along, but Republicans and Democrats did. We could talk through our different perspectives; we could find room for compromises that led to solutions that served the common good. We could tease one another without being mean-spirited or offensive. We could even make fun of ourselves. Years ago, I spent some time with conservative pundit George Will, a very bright man if not a pleasant one. Speaking to a crowd he said, “the Democrats are all about tax, tax, spend, spend, while we Republicans are borrow, borrow, spend, spend!” The disagreements between the parties were largely about fiscal policy, not social or cultural issues. We could disagree without demonizing one another. We worked together for the good of our nation and community in matters where our political views were not relevant. We all supported our children and could not imagine a day where schools would become a center for political disagreement. Political division is asserting itself in so many settings that I once regarded as being above politics.

Perhaps even sadder, and certainly speaking of sin, is the politicization of churches. When I arrived as your pastor in 1983, I would guess that a good 80% of the congregation would have identified themselves as Republicans, but in that era that largely meant that they were fiscally conservative but socially progressive; what we used to call “Rockefeller Republicans.” Certainly, this congregation was long led by fiscal conservatives who believed that the 11th commandment is “thou shalt not touch thy principal.” Without launching into a long story, that is why the principal of the church’s Endowment Trust is locked down so tightly that God Almighty would need Satan as a lawyer to get access to it.

But politics have invaded the sphere of faith in a new and terrible way in our time. I fear the day when someone asks whether we attend a Republican or Democratic church. Those who still remember my ministry may recall that one of my goals was to build bridges between we in the Protestant Mainline (I guess the term for us now is “Progressive”) and my friends in the Evangelical world. That is much more difficult today. I have dear, faithful

Evangelical friends and colleagues who are appalled by the way in which MAGA politics has infiltrated so much of their beloved tradition; it has become the tail that wags the dog of Evangelical Christian faith. Jesus clearly stated that his Kingdom was not of this world, and his greatest offense to Caesar was treating him as irrelevant. Every time Christianity has assumed worldly power it has lost its way and done great harm. Satan knew what he was doing when he took Jesus up on the mountain and offered him the Kingdoms of the world. And Jesus knew his own identify when he said, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Yet the allure of that temptation remains strong, and we tell ourselves that this time we will do it right.

And what of us on the Progressive end of the spectrum? Are radical inclusion and a passion for social justice an expression of our faith in Christ as the Lord and Savior of the world, or have they become the tail that wags the dog of our Christian faith? Is it faith in Jesus that draws us together as a congregation, or a shared social vision? It is a question that we should ask ourselves repeatedly, humbly and prayerfully. My cranky friend and mentor, theologian Stanley Hauerwas, once described us as “the left wing of the Democratic party in an attitude of prayer.” Another friend suggested that the motto of the United Church of Christ should be “We welcome everyone except the people who do not welcome everyone.” I have found that when a statement like that offends me badly enough, it may mean that there is a bit of truth to it.

A sociologist observed that “In Europe, the churches became less popular; in the United States, the churches became less religious.” Ouch! I think he is speaking of the increasing influence of our tails. I am personally fond of our tail, but I do not want us to lose the entire dog: our faith in the crucified and risen Christ, our allegiance to the way taught by Jesus. And if our tail challenges the primacy of that way, it is time to take the dog to the groomer.

Prophecy is centered in speaking the truth to power, and that becomes especially challenging in a time of deep division, when there is not even

agreement on what constitutes “truth.” Our pastors do this with great integrity, for which I am grateful, even as I am grateful that it is them rather than me who are called to do so. But one central prophetic truth is that God does not wish for us to be divided from one another, and when we fall into the trap of seeing others as enemies to be defeated rather than neighbors to be loved, we have fallen into sin and become part of the problem. And that is a tough trap to avoid right now; I struggle with it. I regularly drive by a house with a big yard sign that says, “Deport the liberals!” A part of me that I am not proud of is tempted to ring the doorbell and ask, “Can you send me to Italy?” Laughing and crying get all tangled up for me these days.

Jeremiah’s prophetic vision was of God gathering all of God’s people together, including the blind, the lame, and those carrying children. God was not assembling an army, but calling all of God’s children, including the most vulnerable, to be there with, and for, one another. And when God says that everyone is called to be together, God means “everyone.” One of my favorite definitions of community is “the place where the person you least want to be with always is.” God needs people who are different from one another, and people who disagree with one another, to share in the community of faith, to round off our rough edges, and to teach us patience and humility. There are too many echo chambers out there, and Christ’s church should not allow itself to become one of them.

So, by all means vote. Vote your conscience, vote your ideals and principles, vote with such wisdom as God has given you. Vote above all for the things that you believe God wishes for God’s people. But cleanse yourself of the sinful perspective that those who vote differently from you are stupid or are bad people working out of evil motives. They are God’s children contending with their own challenges and struggles, hopes and fears. They are your neighbors who you are called to love. By God’s grace may we be guided past these divisions, to the unity that a loving God wishes and intends for us. Amen.