

## Covenant

At a concert last weekend I ran into a local pastor whom I know. After we exchanged greetings he said, “You’re preaching prophetically” – more a statement than a question. I paused before I said, “These are hard times in which to preach.” He agreed, and we continued our conversation. What I really thought was, you’re assuming that I’m taking a public stand on current issues. But I have to be the pastor for everyone in my congregation. The people I serve are all over the map on what is happening in our country right now. As a citizen I have my own opinions, of course, but as a pastor I have to be able to incorporate everyone in my preaching. It’s not easy, but it’s what I am called to do. All of this went through my head during the pause before I spoke.

I know that just by approaching the subject of politics, some of you have become hypersensitive to my every word, and some of you have already turned me off. So I will tell you right away why I am going down this route: it was the first thing that popped into my mind when I read today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. He wrote, “For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul?” I immediately thought of the partisanship we all experience every day.

At the time Paul was writing, Corinth was a provincial capital and a major east-west port. He spent quite a bit of time there, working his trade as a tentmaker and proclaiming Jesus Christ. Eventually Paul went on to Ephesus, and another missionary named Apollos arrived in Corinth. Apollos had been trained in a different tradition, so his approach to Christianity was different from Paul’s.

Inevitably, the Corinthians became partisans of the person they liked best. Paul took them to task for that. He may have planted the seeds, and Apollos may have watered them, but it was God who gave the growth. Focus on your faith in Jesus Christ, Paul said, not on the person who led you to that faith. That’s a warning for all of us, both clergy who show favoritism and parishioners who do the same in any church community. My own desire is always to treat everyone equally as a child of God. Even so, I constantly have to examine how I act. All of us should strive to live that way as a community of Christians, looking for Christ in one another.

Deuteronomy also tells us how to live together. The first five books of the Bible are largely about covenant. Covenants were very specific legal contracts in the ancient world, made between two parties with unequal power. Ancient covenants specified consequences if they were broken, and had witnesses to keep track. Biblical covenants were mostly between God and the people of Israel, each of whom made certain promises. God promised to bless his people if they followed him; if they didn’t, he would curse them. God called heaven and earth to be the witnesses to Israel’s covenant.

In the church we still use covenant language today. We make mutual promises to one another. Thankfully, we leave out the curses. I regret that I did not provide fresh copies of Trinity’s covenant at last week’s annual meeting. In it we commit to supporting and encouraging one another, and to be part of a welcoming and embracing community. Our covenant holds us together even when we disagree. The willingness to stay connected amidst a diversity of opinions is one of the main ways that Christian communities differ significantly from our

culture. Outside of church, targeted news sources and social media feeds mean that people often hear only what they already believe. There is little incentive to take seriously conflicting ideas, which are often belittled and dismissed.

As Christians, Jesus holds us to a higher standard. That's really evident in today's Gospel reading, a hard passage for us because it has things we do not want to hear. Jesus says that if you are angry, seek reconciliation, not revenge. Don't look lustfully at another person, even if you don't act on your thoughts. Don't swear. Jesus uses hyperbole to make his point, as even literal Bible readers have to admit – I've never heard of someone who deliberately cut off their hand or foot because it caused them to sin.

In our current political climate, the verses on reconciliation are especially important. In Jesus' context, he said seek peace before making an offering at the altar. Today I would say, if you are upset with recent actions by the President, try to understand the viewpoint and life situation of those for whom Donald Trump is the answer. If you are thrilled with what the President is doing, try to understand the viewpoint and life situation of those who continue to protest. To say that people should just get over it, or that only misguided people can support one position or another, is not the work of Christ. It is not the work of a covenanted people. It is being a partisan of Paul or Apollos, not a follower of Jesus Christ. It is the temptation to say, "You fool."

Is this prophetic preaching? Probably not what my pastor friend had in mind. Yet he and I end up in the same place. We would both say, live the values of Jesus Christ. Show humility. Accept those whom society rejects. Leave judgment to God. Make Christ and life in Christ your first priority. Do that faithfully, and you will inevitably clash with our culture, because our culture lives by values that revolve around power, wealth, and self-centeredness.

Lately I've been re-reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also lived in tumultuous times. I'm amazed at how fresh his book *The Cost of Discipleship* is, though it was written eighty years ago. In it he wrote, "It is becoming clearer every day that the most urgent problem besetting our Church is this: How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?" Bonhoeffer is right. How do we live in the tension between our Christian faith and our culture? How do we overcome the temptation to say, "You fool"? Jesus never said it would be easy. He predicted that following him would bring conflict. We cannot avoid that conflict if we are to be his. But we can keep our eyes on Jesus, knowing that he will lead us, praying that the love which he showed us will continue to fill our own hearts. Living as a covenant community, committed to one another in the love of Christ, we can show the world a better way to be.

[Epiphany 6: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37. The Bonhoeffer quote is on page 60 of my Macmillan paperback edition.]