

## **SERMON 1-21-17**

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We have just witnessed the transfer of executive power in this nation in the Inauguration of Donald Trump as our president. And this inauguration has highlighted differences and divisiveness in our nation. We are finding ourselves as a nation being more politically polarized and factionalized. People are passionate about their political beliefs and that has played out in arguments and even violence. This isn't just something we see on TV. I am aware of differences of opinion and political beliefs even in this congregation, differences which could divide us.

As your rector, I have made the decision to not bring politics into the pulpit. There are enough churches in this town where you can find that, and churches where people of a certain political persuasion do not find themselves welcome. But all are welcome here at St. Peter's and what I have been striving to bring from this pulpit is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which should be above all our other beliefs. It is very timely that we heard today guidance on this topic in today's epistle, St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Paul in the passage this morning confronts head on the factions in the church at Corinth, writing that "it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. Each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas" or "I belong to Christ." The Corinthians have taken sides, and have divided themselves according to whom they like better, or have a relationship with, or find most compelling. Not only that but Paul remarks that they are openly quarrelling with one another. This is, Paul emphasizes, not how the church should be behaving.

Instead Paul appeals to them in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to be in agreement with no divisions, united in the same mind and same purpose. Now is Paul requiring uniformity of belief and behavior, precluding any differences in thought, words and actions? No, that's not what he is saying, for he goes on later in the letter praising the fact that people have in the church different gifts and outlooks which are equally valuable as all the different parts of the body are to the body.

What he is saying is that our divisions should not define who we are in the church, but rather what should define us is what unites us. And he says that which unites us is our belief that Jesus Christ is our Lord, which was affirmed by all Christian at their baptisms. No matter who and where members of the church are baptized, it is in baptism that we declare that Jesus Christ is Lord above all others, and nothing should get in the way of obeying and following him.

We put aside that which divides so that we may follow that which unites us. When we come in this church, when we gather for fellowship, service or mission, we leave our divisions outside so that we may come together in love to follow above all others our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now the devil does not like this. The devil is forever trying to divide us, to get us to value something more than our Lord, to see ourselves as better than others, and in our pride to hold others in contempt. St. Paul saw this among the Corinthians, that through their divisions they were being weakened, they were falling back to the enticements of the world.

Case in point was Paul's reference to eloquent wisdom. In the Greco-Roman world those who held worldly power and influence tended to be eloquent, skillful speakers. Cultured speech, eloquently delivered in a refined fashion, was the telltale of high status, of power and wealth of education and indeed of wisdom. Paul said he was called by our Lord to preach not with eloquent wisdom so that the message of the salvation of Christ through the cross would not be emptied of its power. In other words, salvation comes not by the wisdom of the powerful of the world, but by the truth that the gospel proclaims. It is Jesus Christ who is lord above all and source of true power, and not the worldly powers and their elegant wisdom.

In our gospel lesson we hear of Jesus calling his first disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John. What were his first words to them? Simply, "Follow me." In our baptismal vows we promised to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and we accepted his call to us: "follow me." That doesn't mean follow me just when it is convenient, or follow me when the path is straight and smooth, and then veering off and following someone or something else when the way gets tough. We are called to follow him above all others, and especially when we are enticed to depart from him and put someone else or something else as our Lord, as our God, as our idol. No one, no thing can be more important than following God.

In this political climate, we are encouraged whatever our political persuasion to hold those with differing views with contempt, to belittle or demonize those on the other side or those who the other side is championing. I see this on TV and on social media, and frankly it depresses me. We are encouraged to descend into factionalism and put what divides us above that which unites us, which is Jesus Christ. And Jesus had a simple yet challenging commandment – to love everyone as a child of God, to love our neighbors and to pray for our enemies. That's the secret to unity in Christ. To love. The devil and worldly powers want us to divide and hate; Christ wants us to unite in love.

What can be the counterbalance for this divisiveness in the world? Paul has the answer in today's epistle. It is the church, when it comes together under Christ in unity and love, modeling to that world what it means for a diverse group of people to live and love together as

followers of Christ, and to bring that good news to the world. Here at St. Peter's, you may think that everyone thinks like you, but that's not the case, and I don't think we would be as successful a parish if everyone was the same. I think different people are called by the Holy Spirit to come together, united in baptism to bring their diverse gifts in service to the church, so that we have many body parts united by the love of Christ.

What if God calls the people of St. Peter's to unite in our joint belief and love of Jesus Christ above all else so that when we are able to love one another regardless of our differences, we model that to the world? Rather than we worry that the bad practices of the world will rub off on us and divide us, maybe the world should worry that our good practices in the church will rub off on the world.

This requires discipline on our part, to love when others want to hate, to refuse to use language, or tell jokes or take part in conversations bent on belittling or hating others, to see everyone as a child of God, to love and pray for our enemies. That is our call as Christians, and in the world today, this can be hard.

You know it would have been easier in the gospel for Peter and Andrew and James and John to just have ignored Jesus and kept on fishing. It would have been safer for them to keep with what was familiar. To go along to get along. Jesus' way was full of unknowns. But they dropped everything and followed, for nothing was more important than responding to his call.

What could be more important today than responding to Our Lord's Call: "Follow me"? May we not put other people, or ideas, or things above God, and seek to divide. Instead may we unite in our differences as fellow baptized Christians and respond in prayer and action to God's call to love. Because the world more than ever needs your witness. The world needs the good example of the church, united and loving as the Body of Christ.