

For your consideration...

The people of the Pound Ridge Community Church wanted to share this sermon delivered last Sunday by our pastor.
We pray it will promote the healing of our communities.

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’” (1 Corinthians 1:10-12)

The Apostle Paul begins his letter to the church at Corinth with something that is troubling him. Paul had founded the church in Corinth before moving on to Ephesus, where Paul is writing his letter. Apparently, while in Ephesus, Paul has run into some people from Corinth – some friends or servants of a woman named Chloe. And Chloe’s people have been talking. There are quarrels in the Corinthian church. The church is divided, with people all picking their own favorite leader and point of view.

Some in the church still feel an allegiance to Paul. Others have gravitated to Apollos, the leader who came to Corinth when Paul left. Apollos is a scholar from Alexandria. People are drawn to him because of his erudition and his eloquent speeches. Cephas is the Apostle Peter, who still teaches adherence to the Jewish law and particularly appeals to Jewish Christians. It’s not completely clear who the people who say “I belong to Christ” are. Perhaps they are people who don’t like any of the leaders and have decided they’re going to figure it out on their own.

But whatever leader each person has chosen, their leader’s particular version of what it means to follow Christ is, of course, the right one. And the sense of community – of being “one body” – has suffered.

Chloe’s people have been talking. There is a bad spirit corrupting the life and witness of the church and destroying its unity. Paul’s hopes for the church at Corinth are being threatened by rampant partisanship.

It’s coincidental that this reading comes up in our lectionary on the Sunday after the inauguration of Donald Trump as our 45th president. It would be belaboring the obvious to say that this was the most contentious election in our lifetimes. Hurtful, antagonistic, inflammatory, and ugly things have been said by both sides. And

they continue to be said. Accusations were leveled by both sides, with no regard to the truth. And they continue to be leveled.

In drawing a parallel between what was going on in the church at Corinth and what’s going on here and now, I don’t mean to present modern America as a metaphor for the Kingdom of God. But with that very important caveat, it’s hard not to see that Paul could be writing the very same thing to us today, from some faraway place.

Chloe’s people have been talking. There are quarrels among us. People say, “I belong to Hillary,” or “I belong to Trump,” or “I belong to Bernie,” or maybe, “the heck with all of them, I’m going to be a libertarian.” We have, most of us, chosen our team – our tribe. We have picked our special leaders, maybe because they are eloquent and inspiring like Apollos, or espouse a set of rules we favor, like Cephas. And our tribe’s leader is good and wise, and their tribe’s leader is... well, don’t get me started.

Whichever tribe we identify with, “our” vision for America is, of course, the only right one. And what’s suffering is “one nation, under God, indivisible” – a sense that we are still people united with a common vision.

Of course, this political tribalism has been around almost since the founding of our nation. But the distance between our tribes has never been greater. There is personal animosity between people over political differences. Our government has become polarized to the point of dysfunction. Debate and discussion leading to bi-partisan solutions are all but impossible.

And unfortunately, this has spawned a sense of license to treat each other however we please. We have just spent the last year observing this in action in the presidential election cycle. No label is too offensive, or disrespectful, or unkind. No action is too extreme. No accusation, true or false, is inappropriate or unfair – not when we are protecting the nation from the misguided and dangerous intentions of [fill in the name of the politician or party you don’t like here].

Also unfortunately, the toxic atmosphere isn’t just in Washington. This attitude, and way of behaving, has made its way throughout our country. It’s in our schools and universities, in our community. It’s sitting at our dining room tables. Lest you think I’m leaving myself out, this is probably a good time to admit that the last time Thanksgiving

came and went in our home without one really good political fight was in 2005.

The anger and mistrust have seeped into the life of our churches, as well. It’s here, in our church. Maybe you’ve felt it, or perhaps you’ve heard about it. Chloe’s people have been talking. There has been, and continues to be, a tension that attends any conversation that strays onto a national issue. There are some personal connections here that have been badly strained. There are some relationships here that will take some work to heal.

The question I struggled with this past week was how to make this sermon more than an appeal to be “more civil to each other.” We hear those all the time out of our leaders. And they don’t work. The roots of our disagreement are too wide and deep to be affected by a glib, “Can’t we all just get along?” You probably remember where that came from. They’re of the words of Rodney King, a young black man who was brutally beaten by Los Angeles police in 1991. They were the “call to civility” of his day; a kind of feel-good bromide that was a mantra for some, for a while. Eventually, it became kind of a punch-line.

But not many people remember that in his television interview in 1992, Rodney King said something truly inspiring that few people heard or quoted. King said, “Please, we can get along here. We all can get along. I mean, we’re all stuck here for a while. Let’s try to work it out.”ⁱ

Can we work it out? Author and civil rights activist Dr. DaShanne Stokes has rather cleverly opined, “We elected a man who knows how to build walls when we needed someone who knows how to build bridges.” Regardless of your politics, I hope you are able to pray for our president, now that campaigning is over and governing has begun, that he has the inclination and inner resources to do that. But it would be a mistake to think that President Trump is the only one who knows how to build a wall, or who has built one. It would be a mistake to think that Trump is the only one who needs to build bridges. We won’t find our way out of this bewildering and frightening time if we think the president is the only one with work to do.

In the book, *Righteous Minds: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, NYU Professor Jonathan Haidt says this: “*Morality binds and blinds.*

*This is not just something that happens to people on the other side. We all get sucked into tribal moral communities. We circle around sacred values, and then share post-hoc arguments about why we are so right, and they are so wrong. We think the other side is blind to truth, reason, science, and common sense, but in fact everyone goes blind when talking about their sacred objects.”*ⁱⁱ

Blindness was something that Jesus knew a great deal about. It’s no coincidence that so much of Jesus’ healing involved restoring sight to the blind. And Jesus makes it clear that there is physical blindness, and then, there is just blindness. Following in the way of Jesus always requires that we overcome some kind of personal blindness. And receiving new sight always requires serious, and often painful, self-examination.

You all remember how Jesus said in the gospel of Matthew,

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Matthew 7:3-5)

I have to be honest and say that those particular words of Jesus come to mind for me most often in the form of advice I’d like to give other people. Maybe you can identify with that. And let’s face it. Admitting we have a log in our own eye is decidedly not behavior that we see modeled by our leaders. We don’t ever hear a politician say, “I’ve changed my position on that because I suddenly realized what a big, fat hypocrite I was being.” But it’s hard to imagine real communication taking place, or real understandings being reached, until we at least acknowledge our own emotional biases, and our own pet hypocrisies – until we recognize all the sacred cows we’ve been protecting ourselves.

We as United Methodists should be equipped to play a positive role here. Part of the solution to the degeneration of our political interactions is, I think, hard-wired in our DNA, put there by Methodism’s founder, John Wesley. In 1745, Wesley penned a letter to his flock entitled, “Advice to a People Called Methodist.”

Among other things, Wesley wrote, “Lay so much stress on opinions, that all your own, if it be possible, may agree with truth and

reason....” Now, it might not be clear what Wesley was talking about, in the vernacular of the 18th century, when he told his followers to “lay stress” on their own opinions. He doesn’t mean to hold tighter to them and yell them louder. What he actually means when he advises “laying stress” on our opinions is this: test them. He means question them – ask yourself as honestly as possible why you think what you think. When you encounter new information, evaluate it. Resist the knee-jerk reaction to immediately accept what supports the way we already think, and reject what doesn’t.

Wesley said, “*Lay so much stress on opinions, that all your own, if it be possible, may agree with truth and reason; but have a care of anger, dislike, or contempt towards those whose opinions differ from yours. Condemn no man for not thinking as you think: Let every one enjoy the full and free liberty of thinking for himself: Let every man use his own judgment, since every man must give an account of himself to God. Abhor every approach, in any kind or degree, to the spirit of persecution. If you cannot reason or persuade a man into the truth, never attempt to force him into it.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

So, can we make it work? I think the simple answer is, we must. The Apostle Paul knew that a healthy church needed everyone – people with all different kinds of gifts, and perspectives and passions, and, yes... opinions. The Body of Christ needs hands, and feet, and eyes and ears, and cannot do without any of them. And Jesus told us parables that expressed the reality that the Kingdom of God on earth includes the good, the bad, and the ugly, all together; all stuck here for a while. And Jesus is quite clear in letting us know that the judgment about who is which belongs to God, not to us.

Notice that in the letter we read today, Paul is specifically talking about unity, not uniformity. The answer we’re seeking is not in creating a community where everyone thinks the same thing, but one where very diverse and disparate people can still share a purpose and a destiny. America needs us all. Our country needs the people whose primary motivating policy concern is caring for others, and equality, and fairness. We need the people whose overriding passion is preserving the planet we inhabit. We need the people who are willing

to stand up to our institutions and sound the alarm when we are denying the sacred worth of any group of people, for any reason.

But we also need the people who are concerned about preserving the traditions and values that are the moral framework of our nation. We need the people who defend the things (like our Constitution, which is unique in the history of the world) that have bound us together and made cooperation possible among hundreds of millions of very different people who hold personal liberty as one of their highest ideals. We need the people who stand up for the institutions that have enabled our success as a nation.^{iv}

America needs liberals and conservatives – and libertarians, moderates, anarchists, and socialists. We need their voices. We need to let them all speak their minds. We need to hear them.

In the aftermath of election day, a very thoughtful letter was posted on the New York Annual Conference website by Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton. It was entitled, “The Journey Continues... Responding in a Post-Election World.” Here is how the bishop ended his letter.^v

“In the hours this week when I didn’t know what to say, our son Ian was the one that spoke the loudest. Our third child is a brilliant and insightful young man of deep and profound conviction. In a Facebook post following the election, my son wrote these words:

This post isn’t gonna side with anyone, but I just want to say that real change begins at the bottom. It begins with you. So stop crying, stop with the woe is me “what can I ever do.” You can do everything to make someone feel safe, to help someone succeed, to be inclusive. You don’t need a president to hold your hand to be a good person. Go out and get what you want to get, go out and be the change you want to see.”

Bishop Bickerton continued, “That’s it. When you don’t know what to say, be a good person, help someone feel safe, love everyone without reserve, and go out there in this big, confusing, chaotic world of ours to be the change you want to see.”

I might just add, “We’re all stuck here for a while. Let’s try [with God’s help] to work it out.”

Reverend James
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Pound Ridge
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You can download the audio of this sermon, or give us your comments at: www.poundridgecommunitychurch.org

ⁱ Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind – Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012) pp. XVII-XVIII.

ⁱⁱ Haidt, p. 364

ⁱⁱⁱ From the United Methodist Church Global Ministries website: <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/The-Wesleys-and-Their-Times/Advice-to-a-People-Called-Methodist>

^{iv} Haidt devotes much of Part III of his book to a discussion of the critically important perspectives that each “tribe” brings to the formation of public policy, and the particular ways each side tends to go blind.

^v The letter from Bishop Bickerton can be found at www.nyac.com.