

Proclaiming Christ in a Divided Nation

Today's Gospel describes Jesus sending out three dozen teams to prepare the towns he planned to visit. These teams were to travel in pairs, unencumbered by baggage. They were to concentrate on their mission, healing the sick and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Just imagine what an honor it must have been to be among those handpicked by Jesus. In Luke's previous chapter, the crowd that followed our LORD would have seen him send out the twelve disciples, his closest confidantes, with the same instructions that he gave the teams here. Being chosen for this mission probably felt like being invited to sit at the cool kids' table in the high school cafeteria. But the assignment wasn't without its risks. Even before he took on the Temple authorities and enraged the Romans, Jesus recognized that his message would be controversial, so he gave the teams specific instructions on how to deal with rejection.

Today's passage from Galatians demonstrates that the early churches had their own controversies. Paul himself established the Galatian church, and probably thought he had been clear that Gentiles who joined the congregation weren't required to adhere to Hebrew religious laws, including the requirement that men be circumcised. But others in the early church disagreed, insisting that anyone who wanted to become Christian had to obey the laws of Abraham. This disagreement wasn't limited to Galatia. It raged across the early church, causing such bitter divisions that it's a miracle Christianity survived at all. Some of the pro-circumcision crowd apparently got to the Galatians, which concerned Paul enough that he felt compelled to write the last paragraph of today's passage in his own hand to set the record straight.

Jesus and Paul both had to contend with controversy, and so do we. This Independence Day weekend we, the people of the United States, are watching what the founding fathers hoped would be a perfect union crack under the pressures of political and social division. Last year, the

Pew Charitable Trust reported increasingly stark disagreements between Democrats and Republicans on a range of issues from the economy to the environment, including social justice, gun ownership, public prayer and, of course, reproductive rights. And we aren't talking about minor squabbles. Disturbingly, about 80% of registered voters in both camps said their disagreements with the other side were about "core American values," and about 90% of both parties worried that a victory by the other would lead to "lasting harm" to the United States. Differences of opinion have hardened into clashes over points of principle, and each side is increasingly inclined to demonize the other.

Some experts believe that our political differences are driving young people away from our churches. *The Guardian* reports that young Americans see Christianity as inextricably bound up with hardline political conservatism. *The Guardian* quotes professor David Campbell, who asserts that young Americans suffer what he calls "an allergic reaction to the religious right." Dr. Campbell claims that young people are "especially allergic to the perception that many – but by no means all – American religions are hostile to LGBTQ[IA+] rights." People stay away from church if they expect to be punished and condemned, depriving themselves of spiritual comfort and companionship at a time when social conflicts are especially distressing and the church might be most helpful.

So, faced with intense division, what are Christians called to do? Jesus and Paul offer good guidance. Jesus warned his teams that they wouldn't always be welcomed, but he didn't tell them to stand and fight when they were rejected. Quite the contrary. He told them to protest the rejection, but then deliver the message and just walk away. Similarly, Paul told the Galatians not to come down hard on those who were detected in a transgression. He might have meant people who were caught in a sinful act like blasphemy or theft, but he might also have meant those

whose opinions seemed to be flat-out wrong. Either way, Paul's instruction was to restore the transgressors "in a spirit of gentleness," and not to be prideful about it. Any one of us can make a mistake, so no one should be tempted to lord it over someone else with whom we disagree.

Paul makes a second point that seems particularly apropos today. God is not mocked, which means we can't pretend that God is on our side when Scripture makes it pretty clear that he isn't. And what we sow in the Spirit we reap in the eternal life of the Spirit. We must not grow weary in doing what is right, and we must work for the good of all, especially the family of faith, whenever we can. And, if I'm reading Jesus and Paul correctly, we have to avoid being obnoxious while we're doing it.

So where does this all leave the Episcopal Church in this time of partisan ill will? First, let me emphasize that people are entitled to their opinions, however much I might disagree with them. It's not always easy to remember that, especially when circumstances change as suddenly and drastically as they recently have. In the past two weeks, the Supreme Court has issued several decisions that I find deeply upsetting. It's hard to keep calm, and my fellow progressives aren't helping. My email is flooded daily with irate petitions to sign and frantic demands for money from progressive organizations who still haven't figured out that the Court is largely indifferent to public outrage. They mean well, but I'm afraid they won't get much traction.

So, what *can* we do to make things better? Jesus and Paul would both tell us to follow the instructions we received last week from Bishop Sutton and Presiding Bishop Curry. They asked us to remember that we're a community of love, to express our views peacefully, and to follow the "Three Stay-C's": Stay Calm. Stay Connected. Stay Church. It's not always easy to do that, especially when the people with whom we disagree confront us, insult us or gloat. But Christ calls us to listen to the angels of our better nature, and to respond kindly even when provoked.

My eighty-eight year-old father recently told me that the senior community where he lives has banned all public discussion of politics; apparently, such conversations lead to octogenarian fist fights in the dining room. Dad thinks it's funny, but I'm not so sure. At any rate, management has decided to silence disagreements before they erupt into violence.

As Episcopalians, however, we cannot and must not be silent. If people are avoiding church because they're repelled by the idea of an angry God, we must tell them about our God, who embodies everything good – all love, utter forgiveness, and limitless grace. Our God is to be respected, not feared, and our Savior's instruction is to love God and one another, not to bully or condemn. That's why the Episcopal Church advocates for environmental protection, social justice and reproductive rights. Our God of Love requires nothing less.

Progressives lament that the Supreme Court's decisions have set us back to the 1950s, if not the 19th Century. It's unfortunate, but we've been here before and we can progress from here again. We can speak out for social welfare and educational programs that give children a decent start in life after they're born. We can engage with corporations, voting with our feet and our wallets to support companies that treat their workers well and voluntarily care for God's beloved Creation. We can speak out for equal rights and support charities that help the disadvantaged. And, at every turn, we can tell our fellow Americans that God loves every last one of us, and that Jesus came to save us, not to send us all to hell. God alone is entitled to judge us. Thankfully, we can trust him to judge us far more kindly than we judge one another.

Ultimately, I believe that love will prevail in this country. However, we shouldn't get too excited about whatever political successes we have. Jesus told his advance teams to rejoice not because evil spirits submitted to them, but because their names were written in heaven. I suspect he would say much the same to us. So, this Independence Day weekend, let's rejoice that we are

free to work for the good of all and can trust that our own names are written in heaven. God bless and heal this dear, fractured country of ours, and may God bring us all to mutual forgiveness, reconciliation and love. Amen.