

Sermon: Sunday, October 6, 2016 – 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

I'm going to start today's sermon with perhaps the most obvious statement ever: the world is nervously awaiting the US Presidential Election results this Tuesday.

I've never seen anything like this outrageous, vitriolic campaign. Or perhaps I should say "campaigns" because there wasn't much civility in the campaigns to become the party nominees, either. followed by the campaign to become President. It's been hard to hear so much anger and negativity, but if there is an upside to all of it – and that is a big "if" - it's that it has caused many of us to look in the mirror and ask, "as a Christian, what do I think about that issue?"

So we ask ourselves about Refugees, and our responsibility to the plight of the world

A year ago September we started wondering if we could realistically look at bringing refugees from Syria or elsewhere to the Bow Valley. It started as a chat with one couple after Church on Labour Day weekend, and after a feasibility study and some additional heartfelt discussions, a public meeting in our sanctuary last November 17th determined we would go ahead as one unified initiative, utilizing the already-established Sponsorship Agreement of the United Church of Canada.

Ten days ago, our multi-generational family of six was reunified in Canmore, and we hope to formally introduce you to the family next Sunday morning. Rather than setting up barriers or literally building walls to keep "outsiders" out of our country and community, we witness the deep compassion of Jesus Christ, who literally gave up life itself on behalf of his embodied message of reconciliation and inclusion. We are the Body of Christ in the world, and if we are going to be faithful to that at all, we have no choice but to show Christ's own deep compassion to those in need. As we have heard shameful things said about people of other nations and other faiths by one candidate for President, it causes us to intensify our commitment of Christ Jesus, who welcomes and includes and invites and blesses.

We ask ourselves about Men and Women and Sexism

As you will hear later in the service, in today's Minute for Mission, this week we celebrate the 80th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women in the United Church of Canada. Because that has been a reality for my entire life, I don't think too much about that but when I compare it to other Churches, who either won't entertain the idea of women in Ministry at all, or will allow them to be Pastors, but not *the Senior Pastor* of a congregation, I realize that what happened back in 1936 remains significant, and a point of rightful pride in our denomination.

But I would be deluded if I were to think that men and women are on a completely level playing ground when it comes to Ministry, even in this United Church of ours. I haven't been able to get my hands on the most recent statistics, but in November of 2012 Douglas Todd of the *Vancouver Sun* reported that only ONE of the twenty-five largest United Church congregations had a female as its senior Minister – that being First-St. Andrew's in London, Ontario, which was at the time served by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford. And I have most definitely heard the double-standard when it comes to attire: while I feel the freedom to be a shirt-and-tie guy most Sundays, unless we are celebrating one of the sacraments, more than once I have heard female colleagues in Ministry say that they always wear an alb when leading worship, partly because they like the history and theology of wearing an alb but mainly because when they don't wear an alb, the majority of their conversations at coffee time are about what they are wearing rather than what they just said.

I think that we, as a denomination, have made huge strides relative to sexism, but we have quite a way to go. One of the ways we can claim the gains that have been made thus far, is to keep name sexism, wherever we meet it, as something that is directly opposed to the will of God. Whether it's "locker-room talk" or codified within hiring practices or perpetuated through ads, tweets or Facebook posts that engage in body-shaming; anything that discriminates against anyone based on their biological gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or even their physical appearance, is nothing short of sinful and needs to be confronted.

And we ask ourselves about God: do we follow a God of love, or a god of hate?

It would be too much to expect that a Presidential campaign would be built on good manners. Partisan politics are, well, partisan: you are constantly trying to convince others of your merits and your opponent's deficits. But the level of deep disrespect in this campaign makes me wonder, what happens when seeds of hatred and suspicion are sown? What happens when structured, rational analysis is replaced by name-calling? And most importantly, do these practices in any way reflect the kind of world God wants?

We are reminded, as we size up our learnings from this very divisive campaign, that Christ kept bringing the conversation back to LOVE:

- by saying, “your love for one another will prove that you are my disciples” (John 13:35);
- by sharing table fellowship with outsiders and foreigners and the despised, as a lived metaphor of God's heavenly banquet;
- by demonstrating the importance of what the Apostle Paul would later call “speaking the truth IN LOVE” – confronting people with their ill-begotten behaviour, but always with the goal of widening their circle of concern.

Jesus sets before us a vision of the meek inheriting the earth, the first becoming last and the last becoming first, perhaps even the Chicago Cubs winning the World Series every 108 years (but I digress). Repeatedly and consistently, Christ puts before us a vision of a realm where the poor and humble are lifted up, a vision only achievable when people and nations give themselves over completely to the Divine power of love.

When we look in the mirror and ask ourselves these questions, it leads to one more huge question: **regardless of how the vote goes on November 8th, how are the people of the United States ever going to reconcile with one another?**

Reconciliation is a financial word and a legal word but it is also a deeply theological word. The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* defines reconciliation as “the coming to agreement of two or more persons after misunderstanding or estrangement.” Reconciliation isn't merely to forgive someone else, it is a process that acknowledges that you will need to walk together, side by side, in future. It is not just theoretical, it has a practical, difficult application.

We, as a Church, are learning much about reconciliation from our ongoing walk with our First Nations sisters and brothers. Within the Truth and Reconciliation process we have heard many difficult truths and still need to process what we have heard, even as more truth will be spoken. Many of the things that we've heard about through the TRC hearings are, on a human level at least, unjustifiable and even unforgivable. We have had to let go of defensiveness and blaming, and we have needed to let go of a time clock that wants the healing to happen faster than the systematic harm. Only as we hear the truth, and own the hurt, and accept that it is a bigger task than us humans can transact on our own, will we be able to find the footsteps that will lead to reconciliation.

Today's reading from 2nd Corinthians says this about moving forward, from being divided from one another and alienated from God, to being truly reconciled:

“Anyone who belongs to Christ is a new person. The past is forgotten, and everything is new. God...sent Christ to make peace between himself and us, and has given us the work of making peace.... What we mean is that God was in Christ, offering peace and forgiveness to the people of this world, [and]has given us the work of sharing this message about peace.” (2 Cor 5, CEV)

While it may sound trite or simplistic to say so: it could well be that at this point, the most important thing we can do for our neighbours south of the border, is to pray for them: to pray that God will change the tone of public discourse from hate to love, from the suspicious shadows of division to the brightness of a new day of reconciliation. Congregations and communities and even states will have to find ways to get people talking together and walking together, for I don't think there is any simple way to just “forgive and forget” what has been said and done in this campaign.. As we have found in our TRC process in Canada, there still needs to be accountability for divisive and hate-inspired things that have been said and done, and there also needs to be a decision that we, with God's help, can choose the kind of future that Christ would point us towards. Wrongs from the past need to be faced but they will not have the power to block God's new day in the future, unless people keep giving them that power.

At one level, I know this isn't my fight. Regardless of the results on Tuesday, the American people will need to find their own way forward. But in another way, with the amount of media and entertainment and trade we share, with the amount we visit one another's nations, and as long-time next-door-neighbours, we cannot stay silently distant from their plight. So I close this sermon not with my words, but theirs: a "letter to the Church" by the Bishops of the Episcopal Church in the United States, issued in March of this year:

"We are troubled by the violent forces being released by this season's political rhetoric. Americans are turning against their neighbors, particularly those on the margins of society. They seek to secure their own safety and security at the expense of others. There is legitimate reason to fear where this rhetoric and the actions arising from it might take us.

"In this moment, we resemble God's children wandering in the wilderness. We, like they, are struggling to find our way. They turned from following God and worshiped a golden calf constructed from their own wealth. The current rhetoric is leading us to construct a modern false idol out of power and privilege. **We reject the idolatrous notion that we can ensure the safety of some by sacrificing the hopes of others.** No matter where we fall on the political spectrum, we must respect the dignity of every human being and we must seek the common good above all else. We call for prayer for our country that a spirit of reconciliation will prevail and we will not betray our true selves."

For the sake of Christ, for the sake of the people of the USA, for the sake of the world, may God's own desire for the new life of reconciliation enter the hearts of voters, and candidates, and all who shape public opinion, in these important days ahead. Amen.

References cited:

Blackman, E.C. Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, iv:17. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.

Episcopal News Service. <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2016/03/16/episcopal-bishops-issue-a-word-to-the-church/>

Todd, Douglas. <http://vancouversun.com/news/staff-blogs/why-do-female-clergy-not-lead-the-big-churches>

© 2016, Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church