

September 6, 2020
Rev. Meagan Sherman-Sporrong

Today is our three year anniversary! I pulled up my old sermons on this text, and the last time I preached on these texts was my first sermon as the pastor of Acacia Park Lutheran Church. I will come back to this anniversary in a bit.

My week was pretty chaotic. One of my kids tested positive for Covid. They have no symptoms and seem fine, but they are quarantined in the house, and it messed with our routine. Due to the virus in our home, Dawn and I had to quickly turn around a powerpoint worship service into an emailed Contact Contact service ready for virtual worship. It was actually a lot more work than I anticipated, and I debated reworking an old sermon to preach today.

When I read the sermon I preach three years ago, I was surprised, but not shocked, that I came right out of the gate preaching a social justice sermon. I stressed what loving your neighbor looks like and what my hopes are for us as a congregation as we figure out how a new pastor and congregation loving each other will look. Happy anniversary! Over the past three years, I think we have learned to love and care for each other. Shortly after I began it seemed everyone around me died: my good friend from seminary, Maggie, my step-grandpa, my grandma, and then my mom. You gave me space, and you held me in prayer. It was not how I wanted to begin our ministry together, but it did give us a bond. Over the past three years we welcomed new members that brought their own culture from Grace Lutheran in Elmwood Park, and we adapted some of their traditions into ours. You supported me through two major surgeries, and you are giving me grace as I go through this crazy hormone process of menopause. And now we are going through this crazy year of a virus that is making us spend more time at home and less time with others.

In fact, it is kind of hard to hear Jesus say in this gospel text that where two or three are gathered he is among them. So many of us are living at home alone now. We may be with someone else every once in a while, but for the most part, there are some of us that spend the day in solitude not knowing when the next physical interaction will happen. It is hard to hear Jesus say he is in community when we are worshiping from home - by ourselves - especially since we had to switch over to online worship really quickly this week because my family got a positive test result.

In fact, both the gospel text and Paul's letter to the Romans are about being in community. They are about building trusting relationships. In order to have a trusting relationship there has to be give and take - we learned that together as I support each of you in my pastoral role, and so many of you supported me through some of my most trying years. And I am trusting our relationship as I enter into the social justice part of my sermon.

See, I learned how to preach from a black preacher. My style is a little different, and I have no fear preaching social justice. Yet I learned how to formulate a sermon from my seminary professor, Mark Bangert. Dr. Bangert stressed that sermons are to lift up the gospel. They always point to Jesus. We give our people grace upon grace, and we don't bring politics into the sermon. We were taught to have an equal balance of law and gospel and to lean toward gospel if law is too hard or divisive.

I kind of blended the two styles and have my own preaching style. As a rule I do stick to social justice and away from politics. There are times people want to make social justice issues political, and we can talk about that. But never in a sermon have I supported or denounced any political figure. I firmly believe that I am your pastor, and you need to have your own process of weighing your faith and your political beliefs to determine who you will vote for in elections.

It is 58 more days until Election Day. Each day is beginning to feel like a year within itself. I normally hate preaching in presidential election years because I want to walk the line and not have my politics bleed into my sermons. This doesn't mean that each of you are unaware of who I will vote for, but I would never tell you to vote for that person.

I strive to do so even in this election cycle - but in good conscience I simply cannot. I will not tell you how to vote or who to vote for, but I am going to mention a candidate and share why I will not be voting for him. It is explained in Paul's letter to the Romans.

The passage from Romans is part of a larger passage that spans from Chapter 12 to 15. It has a fancy name that pretty much means that this is the part of Paul's letter to the Roman's where he gives an ethical argument for being rooted in the gospel. See, Paul is teaching the grace that Jesus gives to the communities he writes to. He is kind of a consultant or spiritual guide for congregations that are being formed. He helps them when they have conflicts, and he tries to guide them always in the ways of Jesus. His words were just as important for those early communities as they are for us today.

In fact, this part of Paul's letter makes me think about the beloved community that Martin Luther King Jr. made popular, but it actually originated with Josiah Royce (1855-1916), the 19th century American religious philosopher. It was a part of the popular theological vocabulary of Boston University's School of Theology during the early 1950s when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a doctoral student there. According to the Rev. Shirley Strong, Royce characterized the beloved community as "a spiritual or divine community capable of achieving the highest good as well as the common good."

Royce believed that “Every proposed reform, every moral deed, is to be tested by whether and to what extent it contributes to the realization of the Beloved Community ... When one cannot find the ‘beloved community,’ she needs to take steps to create it and if there is not evidence of the existence of such a community then the rule to live by is To Act So As To Hasten Its Coming.”

Strong notes that King built on Royce’s ideal, especially during the later stages of his life. He came to believe that in addition to the radical transformation of individuals, there was a need for a “deep restructuring of institutions if the Beloved Community was to be realized.” An organizing principle for King’s thinking and work, this ideal was deeply rooted in two primary principles:

The American dream of equality and justice for all
The biblical vision of the kingdom of God

I think Paul is describing what we now refer to as the beloved community in this text. Paul reminds the Roman community that we should strive to owe nothing but love to one another, and this is to own the reality that we all are completely dependent on God’s grace for not only our forgiveness, but for our very existence, and it reframes how we live in relation to one another in our everyday interactions. It reframes it in such a way that other obligations become significantly less reality shaping than they once were.

Importantly, Paul emphasizes that love “fulfills the law” (verse 10). By placing the fulfillment of the law in the context of reframing ideas of obligation, Paul takes another step in pulling the rug out from how law was used in that time and place and, really, how we are using it today. But for Paul, fulfilling the law is being obligated to love of *one another*, rather than obligated to performance or personal relationship or gender or skin color or sexual orientation or faith practice, or who you are going to vote for - when we remove all that, it results in drawing lines of distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, benefactor and beneficiary. This was a mind-blowing concept for a society built on pecking order. It is mind blowing for our own society that operates much the same way.

A Methodist pastor, Dr. Arthur Wright took King’s vision of the beloved community and turned it into 25 guiding principles for Christians. Royce, Dr. King, and Dr. Wright did not believe that the beloved community was some far off longed for dream. They each believed that if we live and love like Christ, the beloved community is within our grasp now.

I am going to post Dr. Wright’s 25 principles, but I do want to share that as you go through them, pray about each principle, and ask God how you can love more and be a vessel of grace by living out the principal. As I go through the list, I am also praying about the election. And this is where I am going to be blunt. The beloved community requires us to come at one another with love and

grace in our heart, not with hurt and division. When I go through the 25 principles, I simply cannot place our current president, Donald Trump, to lift up any of the principles. In fact, he showed us over and over again how he does the exact opposite of most of the principles. I will read each of them. As I read, think about our president and if you witnessed him being one to build a beloved community or one that is working against it.

- 1) Offers radical hospitality to everyone; an inclusive family rather than exclusive club;
- 2) Recognizes and honors the image of God in every human being;
- 3) Exhibits personal authenticity, true respect, and validation of others;
- 4) Recognition and affirmation, not eradication, of differences;
- 5) Listens emotionally (i.e., with the heart) – fosters empathy and compassion for others;
- 6) Tolerates ambiguity – realizes that sometimes a clear-cut answer is not readily available;
- 7) Builds increasing levels of trust and works to avoid fear of difference and others;
- 8) Acknowledges limitations, lack of knowledge, or understanding – and seeks to learn;
- 9) Acknowledges conflict or pain in order to work on difficult issues;
- 10) Speaks truth in love, always considering ways to be compassionate with one another;
- 11) Avoids physical aggression and verbal abuse;
- 12) Resolves conflicts peacefully, without violence, recognizing that peacefully doesn't always mean comfortably for everybody;
- 13) Releases resentment and bitterness through self-purification (i.e., avoidance of internal violence through spiritual, physical, and psychological care);
- 14) Focuses energy on removing evil forces (unjust systems), not destroying persons;
- 15) Unyielding persistence and unwavering commitment to justice;
- 16) Achieves friendship and understanding through negotiation, compromise, or consensus – considering each circumstance to discern which will be most helpful;
- 17) Righteously opposes and takes direct action against poverty, hunger, and homelessness;
- 18) Advocates thoroughgoing, extensive neighborhood revitalization without displacement (this also applies to the Church – working toward responsible and equitable growth, discipleship, and worship);
- 19) Blends faith and action to generate a commitment to defeating injustice (not forgetting that injustice can also be found *within* the Church);
- 20) Encourages and embraces artistic expressions of faith from diverse perspectives;
- 21) Fosters dynamic and active spirituality – recognizes that we serve a dynamic God who is not left behind by a changing world or people, and that a passive approach will not work;
- 22) Gathers together regularly for table fellowship, and meets the needs of everyone in the community;
- 23) Relies on scripture reading, prayer, and corporate worship for inner strength;
- 24) Promotes human rights and works to create a non-racist society;
- 25) Shares power and acknowledges the inescapable network of mutuality among the human family.

This is a tough list. I'm sure none of us live up to all 25 principles, and we can each see areas we need to be in prayer about and ask God for guidance on learning how to give love freely and generously and expect nothing back in return. Even Pope Francis has come out saying that Trump is not a Christian:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEA_28uPW3g&list=PLpHYwpcWWeEboJcYtWdcjE6S2il0VjHaQ.

And Trump's response was that he would let Isis attack the Vatican:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36qhTfCWdiw&list=PLWB9DcEZrbexSsR2hwZ2whWnMIb9AjqcH&index=436>.

See for Trump, everything is an exchange. Everything has a value. He lies daily. He mocks. He demeans. He makes racist and womanist remarks. And mostly, he divides. Our country is the most divided I can ever remember it being and that is because we have normalized the hate speech and false narratives. Think about everything that has been in the news cycle over the past four years. It is nonstop scandal and reactions to, "I can't believe he said that!" Trump takes no blame and deflects from his problems by pointing out someone else's flaws. Then we all moved on to talking about that. He says that there are good people on both sides of a white nationalist rally.

Now I understand that some of you listening to me are planning on voting for him. Maybe you already mailed in your ballot with Trump marked for president. I will never tell you who to vote for. That is your choice and a choice I know you made weighing all your experiences and the hope you have for the future. I honestly respect your decision. I know people have their reasons. But I stand here as your pastor – not your friend, not your daughter. I stand here to share the law and the gospel. I stand here called and ordained as your pastor who took three ordination vows 10 years ago in front of God with this being the last of the three: *That I will give faithful witness in the world through word and deed, that God's love may be known in all that I do.*

Sometimes this vow is glossed over because the other ones talk about the ways we serve our people and God. Those are the action vows, the vows that offer an exchange as Paul warns about in the Romans text. But this last one, this is not an exchange. This is a vow to live out the beloved community. I vowed to give faithful witness in the world through word and deed. My faithful witness to you today is that I cannot stand here as your pastor and endorse or even recommend President Trump for a second term of his presidency. I never felt the need to say this before. Four years ago, I thought he deserved a chance to try to grow into the role if he did win the election. Eight years ago I did not feel the need because each man on the ticket I would have been proud to call my president. Sure, I had my preference, but I would have supported either candidate. Today I cannot say that. Today I won't say that.

I understand that this may be hard for some of you to hear. In the spirit of the beloved community, I ask that you reach out to me. I ask that you trust me and love me enough to have a conversation with me. I promise, I am a good listener, and I am not quick to judge. Call me; text me; email me. Maybe don't message me on facebook; I'm not the best at checking there. But we are a beloved community here at Acacia. I see us living out the 25 principles in different ways all the time. We can love and trust each other. We need to feel safe to practice principles here so we can be examples of them out in the world.

The next 58 days are going to be long and hard. They just are. May we find ways to be a beloved community to each other so we can build one for the rest of the world through one person at a time.

Amen.

Strong, Shirley. "Toward a Vision of Beloved Community." *The Chaplaincy Institute*. February 2007, <https://chaplaincyinstitute.org/portfolio-items/toward-a-vision-of-beloved-community/>.

Wright, Arthuree. "25 Traits of the Beloved Community." *Religion and Race: The United Methodist Church*. The General Commission on Religion and Race, 2016, <https://www.gcorr.org/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community-2/>.