

GO AS ONE
I Corinthians 1:1
Galatians 3:26-28

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I have always loved World Communion Sunday with its invitation to think about the ways Christians around the world feast at the communion table. I can picture those lavish European cathedrals with marble and pipe organs, I can see small gatherings in house churches in central America with folks gathered around a room singing. I know there are churches in Africa and Asia that are burgeoning with people. And there are some places where Christians have to gather in secret, for fear of persecution. Our worship decorating team has given us a visual display which helps us call to mind all of the places around the globe where people are celebrating. The food is different, the music is different, the dress varies, the settings are not all the same. But what we hold in common is very deeply important. There is some kind of bread, and there is a cup. There are words which remind us of Jesus. There is a table around which we gather for the meal which is our spiritual food. This bond we share has the power to bring the world together.

But this year I find it, frankly, inappropriate to preach about unity in the world. What I feel called to address is the rapidly growing lack of unity in our nation. It seems the more pressing problem, the more glaring issue, and the first step towards realizing our commonalities with the rest of the world. "Get your own house in order." That's the phrase that comes to mind. Let's start local and then go global. Before we figure out how to bridge the gaps between nations, between world religions, maybe this is the moment to consider how we can talk with our neighbors, our co-workers, our family members whose politics differ from ours. So many people have told me, in the last few months, that they have lost friends this election season. I've heard stories of family feuds at the dinner table - sometimes when only two people are seated at dinner together! This election is dividing people more than any I remember. Maybe this is the moment to acknowledge that the

American family, more specifically the family of American Christians is a family with a chasm, a split that seems insurmountable.

Throughout the New Testament, there is a call for followers of Jesus to be unified. We hear two of those calls today. I like the way Eugene Peterson rephrases these words, so plainly, in such direct language, in his Message version of the Bible: “You MUST get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another...In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female...” Those were the divisions in Paul’s day. I don’t think it’s going too far to say that if those words were put into today’s context, they would read, “There can be no division into conservative and liberal, Democrat and Republican, supporters of Clinton and supporters of Trump. You must learn to be considerate of one another.” Imagine that we still have differences, but that those differences do not divide us.

The word which describes the American landscape today is the word “polarized.” Polarization is a concept that comes from science, and it involves light, radiation, or magnetism moving in specific directions. Outside science, polarization refers to how people think, especially when two views emerge that drive people apart, kind of like two opposing magnets. We have allowed ourselves to be polarized. Our deep division has been made easier because of the loss of common media outlets, our ability to tune into those sources which share our opinions. Our deep division has been exacerbated by social media. We make a sport of vilifying the other side. We know that it’s not good for our nation. But the Bible says that this division is actually sinful.

What we have allowed to happen, what we have contributed to, grieves the heart of God. When Jesus was asked, “What’s the most important commandment?,” he answered without hesitation. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Love your neighbor. If we are serious about loving our neighbors, then we have to be serious about our neighborhoods, our communities, our state, our nation.

Loving our neighbors means small private, neighborly acts, but it ALSO means caring about the vitality, the character, and the governance of our communities at all levels.

Christians are called to be engaged in the world, oriented towards service, centered in love. We are not blind to our nation's faults; rather, we want to redeem the promise of America for all Americans. Apathy is tempting, but it not an option if we take seriously the call to love our neighbors.

How can we be engaged citizens, community-builders, when we are nothing but polarized? Polar opposites pull apart. Communities only work when they come together. If we focus only on our differences, those differences begin to seem more and more significant. Are there differences between the political parties, between the candidates? There absolutely are, and they're critical in terms of the formation of policy, the appointment of judges, and setting the tone for our nation. But what we forget is that there is also a vast middle ground where people can find commonality. It is that place where dialogue and compromise and civility can take place. When we stand in the middle, eye to eye with one another, we recognize one another's humanity.

Friday morning when I read the [Plain Dealer](#) and the Friday magazine section, I immediately ordered tickets to the Cleveland Play House production of "All the Way," and I'm very much looking forward to seeing this play about President Lyndon Johnson in his first year of presidency. It's supposed to be very well-written, with many themes that resonate in today's political climate. I have wanted to see it ever since it received stunning reviews on Broadway. It wasn't just the glowing review that inspired me to purchase tickets, though. It was, in particular, this one paragraph which motivated me. The [Plain Dealer](#) praises the actor who plays Johnson and goes on to write this: "Not only does the actor bear more than a passing resemblance to LBJ, he seems to have unlocked a deeper but no less essential aspect of Johnson's identity - a desire, above all else, to be loved. Loved in the way that Kennedy was; embraced not as an accidental president but an essential one, something that never happened in his lifetime."

Who doesn't want to be loved? To be appreciated? To know that one's life has mattered? This isn't a play only about Johnson's politics, although I'm sure that's part of it. It's not an issue of judging him for all of his decisions, though that's important in some contexts. What caught my attention is the description of a human being, at its core. Beyond the labels, beneath the surface, which is where we are all alike. Peel away our bravado, take away our bumperstickers, and we are all insecure human beings who want to be loved and appreciated, who want to know that our lives matter.

Political differences are not insignificant. Deciding for whom we will vote is one of the most compelling moral decisions we make. I have made my choice based on the principles I hold most dear, and my vision and understanding of what kind of a country we are called to be. But I know that there are those in this room who are voting differently, and I know that they, too, have made their decision conscientiously, with thought and prayer. If I am concerned about Christian unity, I will not accuse them of having ill motives, nor will I demean them. For I desperately want the church to be part of the solution, not the problem. I want the church to be a place where we learn and practice civility. I want us to be countercultural. It may be fun to make fun of the opposite party, its candidates and its most rabid adherents, but it does not make for healthy communities. It does not lift us up as a nation. It does not help us build character.

Where are the places where can find common ground? What issues does our Christian faith compel us to address? Who is speaking up for those who have no voice? How can we protect those who are most vulnerable? How can the church be a force for good and for change? How can we be a part of the solution?

One of the ecumenical communion liturgies says, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Let this table be a place where divisions are healed, where we recognize one another's common humanity, where we invite Christ into our hearts to search out what is best in each of us.