

Sunday, August 29, 2021

Grace and peace be to you from a God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

If you're like me some passages of scripture speak to you in ways that other passages simply do not. I generally find that one lesson from the four we encounter each Sunday speaks louder to me than the others. Some passages of scripture comfort the afflicted while others afflict the comfortable. Some seem to speak to things that might at the moment seem irrelevant. Others, on any given occasion, speak directly to what is going on with at the that very moment.

We might even wish that some passages were not directly in front of us, confronting us in ways that may make us edgy or anxious or confused. These passages generally surprise us when we encounter them, and it is easy to want to quickly dismiss them and move on.

I found that our second lesson today, particularly, grabbed my attention in a way that made me immediately feel anxious, unnerved, wishing that it wasn't staring me in the face. But it was. And I couldn't ignore it. You, as well, might have made a mental note of it as it was read.

This is what the author of James says: "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore, rid yourself of all sordidness...and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save our souls." He then goes on to say, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Again, when I read this through the first time in preparation for today, I was struck. I could feel my pulse quicken. My coffee kicked in and I was hyper. Why? Here it is – I think this passage needs to be heard by everyone, especially Christians today - not only here in Lancaster, PA but around the world. Perhaps, especially in the United States of America.

Before I continue I want to say that I know that everything that is said today by anyone is filtered through a political lens. We are seen as being on the right or on the left, with little or no middle ground. And that is unfortunate and adds to my frustration and angst when I read this text and apply what it teaches us today.

I keep finding that I wish there were no political parties, as goofy as that sounds. Perhaps if we didn't, we might be in a better position to hear each other, to sort things out, to serve God and others. Who knows?

Walking the political tightrope as a pastor is not easy. Several presidential elections ago, I smiled as I realized that about half the congregation had me pegged as a

Democrat, while the other half had me pegged as a Republican. I smiled and said to myself, "Well done."

It's getting harder and harder to navigate a society where everything one says is immediately filed away under a political party's mantra.

So, I'm thinking of creating a new party – The Good News Party. Everyone is welcome. Everyone can join. Everyone, that is, who is serious about the mandates of the gospel of Christ. Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Green Party members, etc. are all invited to come and understand what scripture and our faith practices have to do with our current messy situation.

I know that on the one hand that's a rather silly notion, but on the other hand, I would certainly check out such a party. Why particularly?

Here's why – and please wait 'til I'm finished before throwing rotten fruit or fists.

It seems to me and certainly others that the situation we find ourselves in today as a nation, as a people, is untenable. Something has to give. We cannot continue to fight amongst ourselves and always blame each other for every wrong that exists. We cannot keep rewriting history to suit our own wishes and beliefs. We cannot live in our world today and continue to oppress others who are citizens, regardless of color, creed, religion or sexual orientation. We will implode. We will self-destruct.

I am increasingly finding it harder and harder, as you may also, to be in conversations with others, some who I still regard as friends, who look down on those whose first language or heritage is not northern European, those who have a hard time seeking equality in education, health care, etc. as a goal worth pursuing, those who are so short sighted as to believe that God is absolutely on their side and if you don't agree then you certainly can't believe in the God of the Bible, those who are absolutely convinced that we need to take care of ourselves first even if it means neglecting those who are not as fortunate.

The notion that political beliefs are more important, more useful and helpful than religious beliefs is running rampant. Everywhere we go, every news organization of every type, seemingly the whole world is caught up in this madness. And the God we worship is being pushed and shoved into oblivion. Does anyone want to hear what God might say about the mess we are in? Does anyone want to put someone else into a conversation that seemingly is only about us, when we do not live a solitary life. Is anyone willing to say, "Hold on, just a minute, have you ever thought about...? And then speak the good news of God to those who are bickering amongst themselves and berating all who disagree.

I had a systematic theology professor in seminary, Dr. Robert Jenson, back in the early 80's, who said that he could envision a day when the church would once again be an underground movement. Many of us thought long and hard about that comment and

were not sure we could agree. Well, fast forward some 40 years later and I fear that is happening today and I often feel that I can't do anything that will stop it.

I grow more and more fearful that our Christian faith is less important to more and more people than ever before and I wonder when and how it might be heard and taken seriously in our national debates and our personal conversations.

And yet many, many people today think and believe that they are very, very religious. Many attend worship regularly. Many pray with regularity. Many speak of our Lord and then act in ways that betray what our Lord has been and continues to be about.

I am hopeful that you see that this is not about politics or a political party. This is about our relationship with our Lord and his word to us, the Holy Scriptures, and how we apply the teachings of our faith in Christ to our daily life. At least in my simple mind this is apolitical – not political in the sense of the word as we commonly think of politics. This is about our living out our faith in meaningful ways that have a chance to have a real impact on discussions of all types today.

We often refer to life in New Testament times and decry the oppression which most folks had to endure. People were taken advantage of by those who have authority and position, those who made the rules and laws, those who were privileged beyond imagination.

And as we fast forward to today, we quickly understand that 2000 years later, life is much the same. Times have changed but the oppressive nature of our society and world continues to thrive. Jesus had the audacity to step into the middle of a society gone astray and proclaim a new, startling message – a message based on God's love for all of humankind.

It was a message that excluded no one. No one. It lifted up the lowly, put those who were the oppressors in their rightful place. It, in a sense, was revolutionary. It quickly caught the attention of those running the show. They eventually found a way to silence this rebel-rouser Jesus – a cross.

However, the Spirit was out of the bottle. The disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, went to the far corners of the world proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God in the future, and the present as well.

So now it is our turn to proclaim God's radical love in the face of, in the midst of a world that seems to more and more be losing its moral compass.

The task before us as we dare to proclaim the love of God for all into current discussions, is not for the weak of heart or spirit.

Yet we, as those countless ones before us, are called to do just that – to speak of the undying love of God for all his people, for all of his creation. Politics aside, the message of God's love can and prayerfully will be able to shine brightly in a world that can be dark and frightening.

Thanks be to God. Amen