

## “Faithful Politics: The Common Good”

Galatians 5:13-15

September 27, 2020

A confession. All week long, heart-wrenching headlines and nerve-racking news updates have mocked my sermon title and drained some of my hope for this morning’s message. At least that’s the lens through which I’ve been interpreting another week in the unceasing storm that is our current context. As the poet, Yeats wrote, “Things fall apart/The center cannot hold.” So it seems. In such a time as this, how do we who profess trust in God and seek to follow the way of Jesus Christ live faithfully *in the world*? Which convictions will guide our way forward and shape our decisions and interactions? Is there a common thread that might knit us together in this moment?

These are not hypothetical questions; neither are they new to people of faith in the 21st Century. The words we’ve heard from the prophet Jeremiah come from a letter written to a community of faith in exile. The prophet addresses his people whose hope was fading and whose God seemed absent. Things had fallen apart. They were exiles in Babylon, strangers in a strange land, removed from everything they knew, and forced to live as second-class citizens in an Empire ruled by the powerful King Nebuchadnezzar. In such a time as this, the prophet speaks the word of the Lord in a series of astonishing orders. In this hostile land, God commands the exiles to build houses and plant gardens and celebrate marriages and raise families. He calls people of faith to make a home in the broken, fallen-apart systems of this world.

Jeremiah summarizes this divine message with a challenge that speaks across generations of the faithful. The prophet uses a Hebrew word that you will likely recognize. “Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*.” Shalom. Peace, completeness, wholeness,

welfare. According to these prophetic words from Jeremiah, our *shalom* depends on the *shalom* of our community...our city...our nation. It is a powerful call for believers to serve the *common* good with acts of love and justice and compassion. It is also more than a little surprising to read in the context of exile. One might assume that the command of God through the prophet would be, “keep yourselves pure and uncontaminated by the outside world” or, perhaps, “turn inward and take care of each other. Don’t waste your time on the *shalom* of the Babylonians.” But the message of the prophet makes it abundantly clear that there is much that the Babylonians and the exiles hold in common. Their futures are woven together. This is how God intends it to be.

As followers of this same God, Second Presbyterian Church is commanded to seek the *shalom* of the community in which we find ourselves. I am moved by your commitment to this neighborhood, this city. Three days each week, because of your vision and generosity, a line of cars stretches across our parking lot and faithful volunteers greet neighbors with warm hospitality, kind words, and bags of groceries that will sustain their families in trying times. Through existing and emerging partnerships, students and teachers from local elementary schools receive vital support from our congregation. Many of you participate in Habitat for Humanity builds, serve families experiencing homelessness through Family Promise, support refugees newly settled in Indiana, and give generously to support the diverse ministries of this congregation that sustain hope and shape faith. And, in more ways than I could possibly enumerate, members of this church make this mission a part of your lives Monday through Saturday in vocations of compassion, care,

leadership, and service. You seek the shalom of this community in concrete and powerful ways, as a community and as individuals. Thanks be to God for your commitment. Seek shalom right where you are, the prophet commanded the exiles. And so too we are called to serve and to care. Our call as a community of faith begins right where we are—responding to needs and living out our faith in our own neighborhood.

This summer, our session convened task forces to help us focus our efforts on local mission partnerships and the call of our faith to racial reconciliation. We know that this work is essential to the purpose of the church and you'll be hearing more from each of these teams in the weeks ahead. At its heart, the call to discipleship is a call to serve those around us, those with whom we share much in common.

But our call does not end there and so our work must not stop there. The *shalom* we seek is more than sustenance or ensuring that our neighbors' basic needs are met. There is a broader obligation that has been placed upon us. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr perceived this in the 1950s when he wrote these words: "When we talk about love, we have to become mature or we will become sentimental. Basically, love means...being responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind."<sup>1</sup> ***People of Christian faith are called to the responsibility of love.*** This responsibility must not be limited to individual acts of service, deeds of charity, or warm feelings for one another. It extends into our communal life; yes, to our civic engagement. In at least this way, the message of the Gospel is unapologetically political—concerned with the *polis* in which we live. We profess both faith in and allegiance to the God of all creation. We confess that Jesus is Lord.

In a dangerous time of division, the Apostle Paul wrote powerful words to the church in Galatia: "you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters." Indeed, freedom is a concept that begins in the very heart of God, who calls us out of darkness and into light, out of captivity and into liberation. But Paul's words do not end there. We keep reading and Paul says,

"only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." Without humility and responsibility, freedom can quickly give way to pride, arrogance, and even domination. Christian freedom hinges on fidelity to the law of love. Liberty must be tethered to love. Why? Because the common good, the *shalom* of all, depends on it.

The message to the Christian church today is quite clear. Last Sunday I observed that we live in an age of ideological antagonism. The capacity for complex thought or genuine dialogue are seen as signs of weakness in this age of shouting smug insults. I voiced my hope that the church might be a place where a civility borne of reverence dictates our interactions.

This week, I want to suggest that people of faith can be those who seek a common good that is deeper than self-interest and broader than personal gain. Our futures are woven together, as surely as the *shalom* of exiles depended on the *shalom* of the Babylonians. We who believe in the universal claim of God's grace must accept the responsibility of love.

This morning I'm aware of the privilege it is to speak to people of deep commitment to the way, truth, and life embodied by Jesus Christ. I'm grateful for the voices I hear each week encouraging me to preach with passion and challenge us all to deeper faith, and I'm gratified by your willingness to move beyond comfort zones with open hearts and minds. The well-worn phrase suggests that I am preaching to the choir, and I accept that as basically true. But this choir, this community, has the capacity and, I would suggest, the obligation to have a profound effect for the common good of those around us, especially the neighbors we may never meet whose *shalom* is impacted by our action or inaction.

Here is my honest and heartfelt conviction, and I certainly include myself when I say this—we must ***do*** more to seek the shalom of the place where God has called us. We must confess that, too often, we have privileged our own comfort above the needs of others. We must confess that many of our neighbors have

been excluded from that common good that we are called to seek for all. In the community of faith, we proclaim that our *shalom* depends on the wholeness of those around us. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr. called this, “an inescapable network of mutuality, a single garment of destiny.” If we believe it is true, here’s the question—what are we doing to seek the *shalom* of others? If the suffering of even one of God’s beloved children causes all of us to suffer, what are doing to relieve this suffering? How do we, in a time of so much heat and so little light, serve the *common* good? These are the questions our faith compels us to ask even, or especially, when doing so challenges our assumptions, reframes our perspective, asks more of us than we’d prefer to give. One of those discouraging pieces I mentioned earlier referenced a term I’d not heard before. *Lethal mass partisanship*. It’s a technical term for a willingness to endorse actual violence against political opponents. A technical term, but sadly no longer a hypothetical one. What does fidelity to the law of love look like in a time of lethal partisanship? How do we begin to envision a path toward the common good for all who share this one garment of destiny?

Today, I’m preaching my 100th sermon at Second (day 850). Tomorrow morning, I’m going to leave town and stay away for three days. I’m going to turn off my devices, shut down my screens, quiet the voices in my head, and pray. I’m going to pray for myself and those I love; I’m going to pray for you, for our church, for our city, for our nation, for our world. I’m going to ask God to open my heart, empty it of what I don’t need to carry and fill it with what I need for the next chapter of this journey. For me, and maybe for you as well, the volume has been turned up way too high these days; I’m going to seek silence and try that for a little while. I hope to be reminded of what is at the heart of our faith. The responsibility of love toward those with whom we share a future.

If you’re feeling hopeless these days, if you are angry, afraid, coming apart at the seams, here’s a suggestion. Quiet the shouting voices—they are not serving you well. Instead, follow the word and example of the one who came as servant of all. Do something for someone else. Invest in God’s work in the time and place you’ve been given.

The date was March 4, 1861. The occasion was Lincoln’s first inaugural address. It was a moment in American history when it seemed unlikely at best that the union could endure, though the only enemy in sight was us. Does it sound at all familiar? I imagine that the words he spoke were received by some as a futile gesture, perhaps even pitiful. A thimble of water thrown on a raging fire. But Lincoln chose words that describe the responsibility of love, and they set the course that held our nation together:

*I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.*

This, I believe, is the call of the faith community in the days ahead. To summon the better angels of our nature. To take on the responsibility of love. Our futures are woven together. May God give us the courage to pursue with passion the *shalom* of our community and the common good of all God’s children. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Justice and Mercy*, 1974. p. 35.