

Making Friends with The Enemy



John 15:9 "Jesus said to his disciples, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.'"

So, is our joy complete? Do we love one another? Do we love our neighbors as ourselves? Can we even call by name all our fellow congregants here in this small congregation, as I asked in my sermon on the Good Shepherd two weeks ago, otherwise we leave too many of our fellow parishioners lumped in a group that is nameless, anonymous, or indistinguishable, and thus easily dismissed and ignored, and not loved. Last week, Sara in her sermon on the Ethiopian Eunuch concluded that we must welcome

all people into our fellowship. Do we do that? This week, I read a poll by the University of Chicago's Institute of Politics that revealed that most Americans now see politics as the most important trigger for whether or not to pursue a friendship with someone. What the poll found was that political partisans now view each other with hostility and skepticism. Three-quarters of both Republicans and Democrats saw members of the other party as bullies. Similar percentages from each party viewed the opposite party as dishonest and advocating "disinformation." So, we are not bound by love; we are divided by politics. We are retreating into our safe little havens, and the gap between the different sides continues to grow and grow. Different political parties now read different papers, watch different channels for news on tv, and intentionally associate only with those likeminded people who agree with them, who see the world as they do.

Politics have now so become deeply intertwined with our culture in this country, that we all understand and recognize certain signifiers to overlap with political belief, even without having to articulate any particular views: signifiers like pickup trucks, for example, or symphony tickets. I have a black friend who not surprisingly gets nervous when he sees a Confederate flag on the back of a pick-up truck. I also have a liberal friend who now says that surprisingly she feels uncomfortable when she sees an American flag on the back of a

pick-up truck. We don't love one another; we are becoming more and more frightened by one another. American partisans are becoming so deeply skeptical of one another and hostile to the other party, that we won't make friends with the enemy.

And when overlaid with other patterns in American politics – like the increased embrace of rhetoric about violence and civil war – the potential repercussions in this country of dividing ourselves up this way becomes alarming.

The American picture, then, is of two hostile partisan groups that do not 'love' one another, do not respect one another, do not even befriend one another. And so, what are we to do? There's no reasoning with 'those' people, we often say. But can we 'love' them? Can we befriend them? Can we even join together in worthy activities, like working with the local food bank, organizing blood drives, or simply gathering as the church, or do we have to divide up everything socially onto different sides of the political and cultural war. Political rhetoric that flirts with or espouses armed conflict is becoming more and more common and alarming, especially in a year for presidential elections. Our country is devolving into something unrecognizable or particularly dangerous.

So, what exactly is the Church's role in all of this? What are we as good Christians supposed to do in the midst of all this acrimony and anxiety? Are we to self-righteously take one

side or the other in this political divide? Are we to justly condemn the views of one party and claim God for the other? How can we abide in love, as Jesus asks us to do? Or are we to avoid political discussions altogether, as so many people do, in order to keep the peace? But there is no peace. Or are we to listen to the words of Jesus to do unto others as we have them do unto us.

According to our Catechism, there in the Book of Common Prayer, the Mission of the Church is the reconciliation of all people to each other and to God through Jesus Christ. So, I am very much interested in promoting conversation and dialogue between the two political factions in this country. I am struggling to bring us together as a people, as a nation, as a church, especially on the eve of a national election. Can we not admit that we need both Democrats and Republicans in our social circles, both liberals and conservatives in our conversations and discussion, in order to simply be healthy ourselves, and in order to be faithful. We need to be able to hear and to understand each other's concerns, and fears. We need to love one another, to call each other by name, to know each other's personal stories. And I feel that the role of the Church in this nation right now has never been more important as an instrument to help us bridge the divide, to cool temperatures, to foster dialogue, and to encourage us all to respect the dignity of every human being. We all need to listen to each other's

viewpoints, with the respect and seriousness as we have pledged in our baptismal vows, to strive for justice and peace among all people. The Church, I believe, is an essential avenue in our country to further this much needed national conversation right now, so that we all have some safe place where we can gather together and actually listen to each other, hear different points of view, reflect upon different concerns, so that there can be reconciliation and love among us. As the Guidelines for Dialogue clearly declare, "it is okay for us to disagree;" but we disagree with ideas, not people! We can love each other as Christians and not hold the same opinion on everything. However, it is NOT okay for us as Christians to dismiss or denigrate individuals or viewpoints that are simply different from our own. We need to be able to listen to one another. We need to understand each other, love each other, if there is ever to be peace on earth and goodwill among mankind.

So, we all need to stop the name-calling, the self-righteousness, and the fear mongering in this election season. Studies have shown that people only really change when they are put in new social environments, when they are put into permanent relationship with diverse groups of peoples and thoughts. It is more about relationships than being right or wrong. I know this myself as a child of school desegregation. The constant shuffling of the boundaries of Houston's public schools to

achieve racial desegregation forced me into a different High School for each of my four years, into very different schools with different social make-ups. There were rich kids and poor kids, black kids and white kids, and rednecks, there were conservative Christians and orthodox Jews.

Studies show that living together with people of other groups can and does reduce prejudice and even change minds. Such immersion is how new emotional bonds are formed, how new conceptions of who is "us" and who is "them" come into being. Thus, reconciliation is more about staying in relationship with one another, than in being on the right or wrong side. The real danger here in our society is our own self-segregation. The real danger here is surrounding ourselves only with people who look like us, who believe what we believe, who speak the same language as we do, and belong to the same social class. For the Mission of the Church calls us out of that complacency, call us out from our protected environments, calls us out from our self-segregation, and call us out into a strange, new world, into foreign and unfamiliar places and people, where the 'other' lives, whose ideas and values may be very different from our own! Our Christian calling then can sometimes be very uncomfortable, even frightening at times; as it demands patience and courage on our part to overcome our natural reticence to engage with the stranger in our midst, with 'those people,' you

know who I mean. And so, this work of reconciliation often takes courage and faith on our part to engage in, because sometimes it is a scary venture. In the end we have to trust in God, if we **really** want to participate in the Mission of the Church.

Thus, are we not called upon to speak up at the very times like these? To stand up for the acceptance of one another, for understanding, for the dignity of our neighbors, for the love even of our enemies, for hospitality to the stranger and the foreigner in our land? Did we not take vows to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons? To strive for justice and peace among *all* people? Why aren't we doing more of that? Where is our voice?

I understand that we feel safer and more secure with 'our' own people. I know that. We like our little silos, and we feel protected there, safe. But we are NOT supposed to be retreating back into our convenient self-righteous circles of friends and safe communities! We are supposed to be engaged in the ministry of reconciliation of all people to each other, and to God our Father! Let's really be the Church, and not a country club. Let's do the mission of God, in a world that now so desperately needs us to do so, in a nation that so desperately craves such an example of diverse people working together and healing our wounds. I tell you, that if we the Church focused more of our time and our energy on confronting these kinds of questions, and less on questions of human sexuality or theological orthodoxy,

then I believe the Christian Church would be relevant in our society today, and that we as Christians would be truly engaged in the God's Mission, and serve as an example of unity and reconciliation to a sadly divided world. **Amen.**