

Where Loyalties Lie *1 Corinthians 1:10-18*

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I almost titled today's sermon "Gospel Politics," given that is precisely what is going on here in this letter from Paul to the church in Corinth. Paul had a sticky situation on his hands: the members of the church he founded had begun to play favorites among their leaders—pledging allegiance to this person or that person. Chloe, who we believe was a wealthy patron of the Corinth church, was concerned. The way the congregation was dividing themselves was threatening the unity of the church. So she had her people send a letter to Paul, who responded with a letter of his own in which he in no uncertain terms told the Corinthians to knock it off.

"What are you doing?" he asks, almost as if he can't quite believe it, like he can't quite understand how these brand new Christians, with their hair practically still wet from their baptism, had so quickly started forming separate allegiances and segregating themselves from one another. "Has Christ been divided?" Paul presses.

But, unfortunately, this is what people do. We divide ourselves from one another. We draw lines in the sand and say they are there and we are here. No doubt this instinct developed as a survival strategy at a time early in human history when we needed it, but is that time still now? Paul doesn't seem to think so. Not only in this text from Corinthians, but in all of his writings, we hear the clear call to open our minds and hearts when it comes to who we see as our brother and sister. "God is for everyone," Paul says over and over again.

This during his time, as with our own, is a message about both religion and politics. For as much as we may try to keep the two separate, the reality is that in the Bible, they are constantly intertwined. Go back through and read the stories of our faith, and you will find that "House of Cards" has nothing on scripture when it comes to political drama. Sampson and Delilah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, the Exodus, Esther and Mordecai, David and Uriah, Judas and Jesus, just to name a few. The details of the stories differ, sure, but the underlying theme remains the same—human beings trying to figure out which side they are on and who is on that side with them.

For this reason it always surprises me when people say that politics should not be discussed in church. To do that we would need to leave out large portions of scripture. Of course I know that when people say politics and religion don't mix, what they mean is that faith is not, and should not be, aligned with a political agenda. This is true, because no party platform could ever hope to fully embody the standards of our faith and no candidate could ever hope to represent that faith and be voted into office. Such a person would never be elected. We know this. And how we know this is because the one person who could have done it was executed by the government with the approval of the majority.

But that reality does not remove for us the need to acknowledge the overlap of politics and religion. Especially not today. Not when our country faces a divide unlike any we have seen in recent memory—a divide that has only grown wider in the past

forty-eight hours. No matter who we voted for and no matter how we may personally feel about it, there can be no denial that the people of our country are at great odds with each other. Neither can there be a denial that for all the talk of the need for unity, the political rhetoric on both sides continues to further the opposite.

And in many respects that divide cannot be avoided. There are some things that are just wrong, and the need to say so, the need to draw that line, is a vital part of our citizenship as Americans and our freedom as human beings. But, at the same time, if we say we want unity in our world, if we say that all people are our brothers and sisters, if we say God's grace is wide enough and deep enough to hold us each and every one, then something has to change, and we cannot continue on as we have been.

For while my own belief and prayer has been that our country is neither as dark as the new administration has made it seem nor will the next four years be as dark as many fear they will become, for that to be true a lot more is going to be required of us—of all of us. Because it is not enough just to cast our vote and then let the chips fall where they may. It is not enough to throw up our hands in celebration or lament. It is not enough to protest or to criticize those who do. It is not enough to advocate and donate to the causes we believe in because these actions, as important as they can be, do not necessarily further unity. And I do hope and believe that is what we all ultimately want, even though we cannot yet seem to agree on how to get there.

And I think this is what Paul understood about the church in Corinth too. I don't think he believed that deep down what they really wanted was to be separate from one another. They just did not yet know a better way. That is why he tries to remind them, and us, that Christ does not belong more to Cephas than Apollo. Christ does not belong more to the Wal-Mart employee in Kentucky than to the Wall Street executive in New York. Christ does not belong more to those who are wealthier or better educated than to those who are not. Christ doesn't belong to one race, one gender, one zip code, one party, one person any more than any other. That, he says, is the wild and scandalous claim of the gospel. Which, yes, to some is going to sound like sheer foolishness but for others is saving grace. Christ belongs to us all. And we all belong to him.

For those who are upset about the new leadership in our country, those who are wondering and asking what can be done, I realize that what I just said could still sound abstract. But I assure you, once you start putting it into practice, once you start measuring every word, every choice, every action in light of whether or not you are furthering the unity of God, what you will find is that it is more than enough work for the next four years; it is more than enough to fill the next forty.

And for those who are pleased with the new administration and those who feel all will be well, be alert for the lure of complacency. It is all too easy to see only what we want to see and hear only what we want to hear, all the while missing the steady erosion of rights and the breaking down of the bonds of trust that link us to our neighbor. Any voice that seeks to lead by pitting one group against another should raise our suspicion and make us all the more critical of what is taking place.

The truth at the center of our existence is that what happens to one of us happens to all. It may not seem that way given all the talk lately about the "bubbles" we live in that separate us from one another, but I think we all know how easily those bubbles can burst. And how the fear that keeps the young father up at night worrying about

the future of his job in manufacturing is not all that different from the fear of a newly immigrated mother who sought out this country for a better life for her children and now wonders if she will have to leave. Because we are, as Martin Luther King said, “tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” “[Because] for some strange reason,” he says, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way God’s universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”

This, to me, serves as a reminder that God does not give up on us, that throughout the span of human history, as the pendulum has swung from one side to another, through all the zigs and zags, and for every two steps forward and one step back, God has not given up on us, and so we ought not give up on one another. Even when it is really tempting to. Especially when it is really tempting to. Because while the work of unity is no small task, God has determined that we are up for it, and that by linking each life to the life of another, God has placed a significant amount of belief in us and has pledged a great deal of loyalty to us as we see this work through.

I’m not sure we always think about it this way. We tend to talk more about the need for us to be loyal to God rather than remembering God already has and will continue to be loyal to us. They are two sides of the same coin, yes, but there is something in knowing that even when it seems like humanity has done everything in its power to create hell on earth, God continues to hear the groans of creation as the cries of labor pains, and with a love that only an expectant mother could have, God remains steadfast. If we can truly believe that, if we can hold on to that knowledge with everything we have, then we will find within us the courage and the strength to keep believing in each other. This, again, to some will look like complete foolishness, but my hope is that we will know it as the power of God. In this way we will be able to rise above the instinctual drive to divide ourselves from one another, because we will know our God believes we can do better than that. Our God believes we are better than that.

This is not to say we should not continue to be active in civic life or to stand up when we feel our core values are being threatened. It is not to remove ourselves from the world but simply hold ourselves to a higher standard as we engage with it. It is to remember that despite the significant differences that may exist, any time we are speaking in favor of or against someone else, we speak about a child of God, a life that, just like ours, is woven into God’s tapestry of destiny, and a soul to which, just like ours, God says, “You belong to me. And I haven’t given up on you. I haven’t given up on you.”

Because today as with every day before it and with every day to come, God’s loyalty will remain firmly on our side. We just need to decide where ours will be. Will we continue to let politics divide us, or will we aim for something bigger, something better, the great striving towards unity which we have been called to undertake, a task that none of us can complete on our own?