

## “Peace-filled News”

### Romans 15: 4-13

As many of you may remember a few weeks ago, Sandy and I led a group through the deliberative dialogue process. Again the goal was not to solve the problem of discerning what the church’s role was in a divided society. Rather, it was an opportunity for us, as people of faith, to come together and talk, to come together and listen, to come together and discern what we have in common as values which shape our faith.

That night we had a group of around 11 people, ages ranging from mid-20’s to...let’s just say older. The group consisted of males and females, all from the background of moderate to progressive leaning politically. Sandy and I thought to invite guest who might be of differing political persuasion but decided that this work of reaching across the political divide was too important for us to mess up the first time around. We wanted to do a trial run before we presented it to the larger community.

I think it is safe to say that the experience of our deliberate dialogue was enlightening for all of us who gathered there that night. There were comments like “This is important because for the wider Church, we are already experiencing the divide play out in our pews. We have seen how divisive votes have spilt and

separated denominations and congregations. Or comments like “I’m just hoping to learn some tools to use at my extended family gathering for Thanksgiving. We have not be able to enjoy a family meal for years because of the tension surrounding the political divide.” There were comments like “We grew up in the same house. How did we turn out so different politically and theologically?”

Again let me reiterate, the goal of the deliberate dialogue process was not to point fingers nor was it to finalize any answers. In fact, after experiencing the three options connected with the role of the church in a divided society, option one being the church as a refuge meaning that the church should refrain from taking political stances on issues that might divide the congregation and distract it from its core mission, the second option being the church as a mediator meaning that the primary focus of the church should be on helping people of faith navigate the political fray and bitter partisanship which divides us, that the fundamental ministries of the church should be primarily include pastoring, teaching, faith formation and congregational care. The church does not take a stand but rather equips its members with skills to engage with different perspectives, to listen to the marginalized and to become agents of reconciliation for individuals, communities and society. The third option for the church’s role in a divided society is that the primary focus of the church should be to engage in the public square in order to

live fully into its mission, that the church should be a prophetic voice in the midst of the political fray, tensions, and bitter partisanship which divides us.

I don't want to spoil anything for everyone but I can tell you that if you are wondering what option the group gravitated to that night, the answer is yes.

Even after we reviewed all of the options, the group ended up with more questions than answers. We ended up trying to find a both and solution that would work for all in good disciple fashion. We embraced our name as a congregation and tried to find a solution that was midway for all gathered.

There was so much there for conversation and dialogue through this deliberative dialogue process that night. I won't go into much more detail but I do want to lift one thing up, one learning that I keep going back to over and over again...that learning being how important this whole process of listening to one another really is. We see the lack of it play out every day as we go to our jobs, as we come together as families, when we go to the grocery store, even driving our cars around town. People constantly talking over each other without really listening, without really hearing one another, without really seeing each other as people, real people, with faces and names, with different experiences, with different insights...so many differences yet all seeking the same thing...all of us

seeking connection, all of us seeking community, all of us seeking to be seen and valued as a person, not as statistics or stereotypes.

I wish I could say that the group that night came up with a plan, something that if we just would follow these three steps, than we would be able to cross the political divide and we could all live in peace and harmony. Don't get me wrong. I think we started that process but it still has a way to go.

However, what the deliberative dialogue process did make me realize is that crossing this divide, crossing the barriers which society uses to separate is not easy but it is what we are called to do as people of faith. This being in relationship with one another, this being in community is not easy. It takes work. It takes hard work. It takes stepping out of our comfort zones. It takes leaving our pews. It takes engaging in the often time difficult conversations we would rather avoid. But as people of faith, that is what we are called to do. That is what sets us apart from the rest of society...being brave enough, being courageous enough to break bread with the people who are different from us, to serve along beside with people we don't necessary agree, to reach across the divide and find some common ground because that is exactly what Jesus did in his ministry here on Earth, because that is exactly what Paul is talking about in our text today, because as one commentator put it. "unity, caring for one another's welfare, being responsible to and for one another is not merely an exercise in niceness and good feelings for us as people of faith. It is

our bold purpose.” Let me say that again: “unity, caring for one another’s welfare, being responsible to and for one another is not merely an exercise in niceness and good feelings for us as people of faith. It is our bold purpose.”

You see, living in a divided society is not unique to us as modern day disciples. People of faith have been doing that since its very beginning of time. And figuring out how do the work of welcome in a divided society is not something new the church has to figure out. It has been dealing with this issue since its founding. From the very beginning, the early Church had to come up answers to the question of what it means to be a united community of faith, to what it means to be in relationship with those who are different from us. In the very early church, there were rich and poor, young and old, slave and free, all together in one place. The rules which dictated the behaviors found in the secular society no longer applied. Somehow, this group of imperfect people had to figure out how to be the Body of Christ here on Earth, holding to the values which set them apart from the rest of society, values such as grace, love and humility where the rest of the world valued power and might. The early church had to figure out if Jesus really meant what he said when he said things like “Love your enemies” or “that people will know you are my disciples by your love for one another.” The early church had to move past merely existing and move into living out this vision of God’s Kingdom here on Earth, where all are welcome, where all are seen as valued

children of God, where all are listened to and heard. The early church had to for its own survival, had to figure out what it meant to not walk away from each other in Christ.

That's why Paul time and time again tells the early church that separating and dividing was not an option for them. The work of the Kingdom of God was too important. They are called to be in community with one another, to be connected with one another which means being in a relationship as brothers and sisters Christ with no readymade exit plan.

Sure Paul knew that these communities of faith would argue and disagree. They were filled with imperfect, ornery, often time grumpy people. That's why he had to write letter after letter addressing all their fights. In fact, most of our New Testament deals with Paul addressing all their fights. Paul offered these communities of faith wisdom, wisdom that we still turn to as modern day disciples to deal with the conflict in our own churches and everyday lives.

But the thing we need to realize is that each time Paul wrote one of his letters to the early communities of faith, he always reminded them that if we, the very ones who confess Jesus to be Savior, the very ones who know that there is another way of being, a way of peace, a way of love, a way of grace, if we as the very ones who proclaim this radical vision of the Peaceable Kingdom for all of

Creation, if we can't get it right, if we can't figure out a way to invite our common expression of hope to unify us, than who will?

Paul tells the early church over and over again, that this work of being Jesus' disciples is too important for us to simply walk away. And in our text for today, we don't find anything different. Paul is telling the early church, is telling disciples of Christ, past, present and future that we know what we are called to do. Jesus showed us when he welcomed us, when he showed us how to reach across the divide and remove the things which kept others out. Jesus showed us what we need to do as his followers when he embraced us as God's very own. Jesus showed us how to do this work of welcome every time he broke bread with the sinners and tax collectors, when he engaged in conversations with the Pharisees and Sadducees. Even on the night when Jesus was betrayed he sat down at the Table and offered grace to the one who would betray him, to the one who would deny him, to the very ones who would abandon him on the cross.

Paul builds on this understanding of Jesus' ministry as he lifts up that our very Scriptures are filled with examples of how God continues to work through the promises given to our ancestors to bring about healing and wholeness for all of God's people . And if we ever forget this, all we have to do is to turn to the Word of God for instruction because the stuff we are talking about, the being in community with one another, the being in relationship with one another, all of it is

not just speaking in theory and hypotheticals. It is the very foundation of our faith as disciples of Christ because we know practicing what we preach says more about who God is than it ever says about us. We realize that the very character of God is at stake when we profess to be the living breathing Body of Christ here on Earth.

This realization is what gives us the courage, gives us the strength to continue to carry on in faith, to hope for unity as we work together, as we serve together, as we do the work of welcome to and for all, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or political leaning.

And for me this is where the good news, the peace filled news of the Advent season finds me. It finds me in the reminder that the work of the Kingdom of God is not about me. It was and always is about God, a God who loves us so much that God would become Flesh so that we might live in the light, so that earth would be filled with the knowledge of God, so that we might change our hearts and experience the Kingdom of God in our midst here and now. The Peace filled news is that we have the courage to do the hard work of the Kingdom of God, not because of who we are but because it shows this world just exactly who God is. As the church we continue to reach across the divide, holding on to the hope of unity because we know, through the promises given to us by our God, one day all of God's people will live in harmony with one another, lifting our voices as one as we glorify our God. Amen.