

Unity in Diversity
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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The Lord's Supper

For Reflection *"It is possible God has not chosen sides in this current conflict."* Abraham Lincoln

Hebrew Scripture Reading *2 Samuel 5:1-5,9-10*

¹Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. ²For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in. The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." ³So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel. ⁴David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. ⁵At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. ⁹David occupied the stronghold, and named it the city of David. David built the city all around from the Millo inwards. ¹⁰And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him.

Epistle Reading *2 Corinthians 13:11-13*

¹¹Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹²Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. ¹³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Meditation *Unity in Diversity*

When I was in Israel in 1996, I received a small certificate to record the fact that I had been in Jerusalem as it commemorated David's making the city his capital—the 3000th anniversary of the events recorded in this morning's Hebrew Scripture reading. When David made Jerusalem his capitol, Israel was already almost a thousand years into its recorded history and was just concluding its *first* royal reign.

Saul was Israel's first king, designated by the prophet Samuel. His rise to king marked the end of the period of judges in Israel at the demand of the people, who wanted a king like other nations had kings. They had God as their king and the Lord of hosts to lead their armies, but, somehow, they thought they would be better off with a human king. God told Samuel to go ahead, but to warn the people of the problems they would face when they had a king like

other nations: their sons conscripted for wars; their property consumed by taxes to sustain armies and palaces; their daughters to be workers for the chosen friends of the ruler; and eventually find themselves slaves to the ever-demanding, ever-expanding needs of earthly royalty. [I find myself regularly amused when people suggest those old-time, old-fashioned writers of scripture didn't understand how the real world works :-)]

If the people heard Saul offer God's warning, they didn't care: "Give us a king." They got Saul, who was a successful chieftain and warrior before the demands of rule, of providing justice and leading armies, wore him down. Amid internecine battles, critical evaluations of his kingship by Samuel as God's spokesperson, and David's own machinations, Saul died in battle.

While David had been designated by the aging prophet Samuel as God's next choice for king of the tribes of Israel, the fact that David was God's choice was, in fact, the third reason the chieftains indicated when asking him to rule. First, he was family, meaning he was more akin to the southern tribes than Saul has been. Secondly, when Saul had been too busy with other royal matters (and probably mental illness) to go out to war, it was David who went instead. They eventually got around to mentioning David was God's choice.

David was Israel's second king and under him the tribes of north and south would be united in one nation. It was under David's rule, far more so than under Saul's, that all God's warnings about what would happen to the people came true: taxes, confiscation of property, conscription of people for war and labor; an enormous royal court and grand building plans to support. Even with the great and magnificent King David, there would come a day when scripture would report: "It was spring when kings went out to war" – and David stayed home to watch a woman named Bathsheba take a bath. Soon the battles would begin again—to consolidate power; to steal power; to retain power; to direct where power and extraordinary wealth would go after David's death and all the related complications that had nothing to do with serving the people.

The nation's glory would fade not long after David's death, coming apart during the reign of his son Solomon. This time there would be two kingdoms—north and south—rulers critically evaluated by their contemporaries as well as by history.

Israel's history is full of cycles of excitement about new leadership; possibilities for justice and peace; hopes that the new person will have none of the limits or foibles of his predecessor; hope and expectation that eventually crumbles into disappointment in the face of greed or illness, the complexities of governing, the costly demands of war and building programs; the divide between rich and poor; or simply human limits confronted by the demands of governing. What never seemed to change was the expectation that new blood, a new leader was the answer—as though all history pivots on the abilities of one or two people.

We are three thousand years away from those events and still a half a decade from celebrating this nation's 250th anniversary, but the story sounds strangely familiar. Governing any nation is never simple: governing ones filled with diversity of tribes, cultures, religions, ideas and disparities in opportunity redefines what it is to be challenged. Yet again and again, people and nations expect others (yet somehow not themselves) to do just that. More than 70 years ago now, in a moment of frustration, responding to the myriad demands on his time, energies and skill set, a post-war Charles De Gaulle once asked, "Who can govern a country with two-hundred forty-six kinds of cheese?"

The world has become incredibly more complex—or it moves faster, or the news moves

faster, or the world changes faster, or people's expectations are greater than in De Gaulle's time, let alone three thousand years ago. What hasn't changed is individual and group expectations that personal passions will be met on a national scale; that somehow all the personal passions can be balanced, but if not, then let them be mine or yours or hers or whoever has the most money or the loudest voice.

Last week at Wegman's, I stopped counting when I ticked off more than 300 kinds of cheese. If only our problem was cheese. Then or now, a varied diet (as opposed to some having more than enough to eat and others going to bed hungry) is not what makes governing a country complicated. In the 2020 census, it was determined there are at least 329,500,000 people here. Given the challenges of a pandemic, political animosity about who ought to be counted, by whom and who paid, subsequent reporting indicates that is a significant undercount. Those people fell into: seven categories of race and ethnicity including "mixed" and "other;" and more than 20 religious traditions (with all non-Catholic, non-Mormon Christian traditions counted as one). It takes a much more detailed reading to discern things like number of registered Democrats or Republicans or Independents or Green Party members or Libertarians, (let alone those who vote a straight ticket); those who are pro-literacy, working against the death penalty, for justice, for public safety, for the planet; for individual's control over their bodies, for hunger ministries, in education; for responsible gun ownership; for or against same gender marriage; the wide spectrum of sexuality, those who have no access to medical care and those who provide it; those with options for education and those who will never have them; those whose faith guides their opinions about the nature of public life and those who object when faith does guide those decisions (at least others' decisions); the increasing divide between rich and poor and the devastating cancers and violence, especially gun violence, that still tear our nation apart. A census can't record who wants to fly the flag and who wants to burn it; who has fought under it and who has objected to its wars; who wants to kneel or turn away and who removes their hat or covers their heart; it doesn't even record how many think we ought to sing a national hymn in church today. Nor does it reveal the truth that even the small group of people in this room do not agree on any of these issues let alone all of them. Nor will it reveal what we know to be the equally untidy truth—that no person can be "analyzed" in all categories by knowing where they fall in one. There is no census count that demonstrates how polarized we have become—how our attitudes harden along lines of personal passion and the feeling that "If you are not for what I am for, then you are against me."

In the last week, the news has been filled with reports of soaring energy prices, lingering supply chain issues, protestors for and against any number of court decisions or activities of our fellow citizens, Covid and monkeypox continuing to be of international concerns, violent storms, climate change and its consequences, war in Eastern Europe, and the critique of elected officials in restoring the economy, immigration policy effectiveness, how to do the much needed re-building of infrastructure—the demand that a handful of people quickly cure the nation of its ills—problems that have plagued this country for decades.

All of it, all of it, suggests there is one person to blame, one direction for all fingers to be pointed and absolutely none of those pointing fingers are self-directed. Somehow those of us on the sidelines know better than those in the trenches what to do and how to solve the problems.

I am not going to argue that we ought to be ruled by God and return to the age of the judges (who gets to be a judge and who chooses is a reignited debate). Rather I am going to remind us of two things:

1) History shows again and again that people get what they ask for. To cast a vote is not to absolve ourselves from responsibility for recognizing that just as we are the church, we are the nation. It is not some "other entity." To the degree that we ask for a refusal to compromise on issues important to us; while condemning others for their disinclination to compromise; where we continue to seek candidates who meet the niche requirements of our personal agendas; where we seek super-humans who can do everything and have no flaws (in other words, the non-existent); where we refuse to set priorities in our personal lives, our voting lives, our faith lives, and our economic lives, for those ideals which we espouse; to the degree that we seek the perfect person to govern us, but refuse to be governed; the perfect person to lead us but refuse to be led; refuse to allow the implementation of decisions until all its parameters are according to our personal liking, so that governance grinds to a halt; to the degree we refuse to engage the complex discussions demanded by the time, while expecting someone else to do it for us; – (and no single one of us is innocent of those failings or challenges)—to the degree that we do all that, we contribute to the chaotic national life we deplore. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, "Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country."

2) As a people of faith, we are a post-Christ people, called to do Christ's ministry of healing, reconciliation and building up of the community for the sake of the whole world. We are called to seek the wisdom of God and the inspiration of the Spirit in compromise. We are called to look around us and remember that even though we agree on very little, we have built community here—we are bound to one another by faith and service, mutual regard and respect, and we have the power to take the things we have learned here into the world—building such relationships wherever we find ourselves. We have the power and the vision and the skills to create safe places for disagreement, in reconciling people, one to another, in accepting that people are human and to take the lead in building the community and nation in which we live.

Let us be driven by the awareness that finding common ground, reconciling with others, seeking the positive in our life together and doing the work of reconciliation is no easy overnight task. Let us be encouraged and inspired as we exit the days of hard pandemic lockdowns with the knowledge and practice we have gained in reaching out to the world around us when we could not be together inside these walls. Let us be reminded that the gifts and challenges of the days to come revolve all around how we empower ourselves inside these walls for life outside these walls. Christ came, ministered, lived and died for the sake of the whole world, not just a few. Can we, his faithful followers do any less?

Finally, St. Paul's charge and blessing for the church at Corinth is for us as well. "Put things in order, respond to my encouragement, be in harmony with each other, and live in peace—and the God of love and peace will be with you. Say hello to each other with a holy kiss. All of God's people say hello to you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."