

“AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST”

A Sermon by the Rev. Don Gall
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Eugene, Oregon
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Text

II Corinthians 5:16-20

When Pastor Jonathan first asked if I would be willing to preach on this Sunday during his absence, I was not fully conscious of the proximity of this day to the momentous events that would unfold over this past week. Had I been fully cognizant, I might have relied on a severe backache, or some other excuse, to get me off the hook. While the easy way out would have been to preach on some text completely unrelated to the political rancor that is dividing us as a nation, I knew I could not do that. We who stand within the prophetic tradition know that we are called to comfort the afflicted, and, when necessary, to afflict the comfortable. So, where even angels might fear to tread, I have chosen to address the issue head-on, trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the forbearance of any who might take umbrage with my views. So before we begin, please join me in an attitude of prayer.

*May the words of my mouth,
the thoughts in our minds,
and the stirring of our hearts,
be acceptable to you, O God,
our strength and our redeemer.
Amen.*

In a book entitled *Children's Letters to God*, a little girl asks the now familiar question, “Dear God, who draws the lines around countries?” She might also have asked who builds the walls that separate people and nations from each another, for in the past decade over 6,000 miles of steel, wire and concrete barriers have been erected which now encircle, crisscross, and effectively divide nations, communities and neighborhoods all around the world. The U. S. currently ranks third among all the wall-building nations and President Trump has vowed to build another 1,600 miles of wall between us and Mexico. Why? Why in an age of supposed enlightenment when globalization was supposed to tear down barriers has so much of the world gone into hiding again behind its walls and fences?

Perhaps for the same reason our ancient ancestors built walls in the first place—**fear!** Today, with millions of refugees still pouring across borders to escape war, poverty and oppression in their own lands, coupled with the threat of terrorist attacks anywhere at any time, and the possibility of a mass shooting occurring where we least expect it, fear has become a universal condition. Whenever we get on an airplane now, or go shopping at the mall, join friends at our favorite restaurant or club, attend classes at school, or even gather for prayer in a church, we realize how vulnerable we have become. Under such conditions, is it any wonder that fear runs rampant?

Some people and nations deal with their fear by turning inward and becoming self-centered, thereby creating walls between themselves and the threats around them. Others

choose to carry guns in the hope of warding off the evil that would do them harm. Still others barricade their doors and seal off their borders, hoping to prevent the entry of certain individuals and even certain religious groups, thus adopting a fortress mentality. It's the kind of fear that leads to isolation, estrangement, and despair and frequently ends up with people and nations aligning themselves on opposing sides, neither willing to listen to or understand the other. That kind of fear builds walls that divide rather than bridges that connect, and it destroys that sense of community essential for a civilized society.

It is life according to the law of the jungle. It is the doctrine of the survival of the fittest. It means subscribing to the view that the race of life is to the swift and the battle to the strong. It involves in the final analysis the establishment and maintenance of the competitive principle and the rejection of the cooperative one. It is giving in to that version of the Golden Rule that decrees that "those who have the gold get to rule," and judging by the composition and net worth of many of our government officials today, that would seem to be true.

But self-interest as a working philosophy of life, be it in politics, business, or in one's own personal affairs, is at the root of practically all the evil and misery in the world. It is also the cause of much of the fear and anxiety over the direction in which we may be headed as a nation. President Trump says he wants to bring the country together, but his determination to make America first in a world beset with glaring inequities is having the opposite effect on millions of Americans who believe we live in a global village of interdependence. The walls that divide us are thick and strong and high, and some think it may take a miracle to tear them down.

So, as Christians, what are we to do? What would Jesus do? In a recent book by Obery Hendricks, Jr. entitled *The Politics of Jesus*, the image of a "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" has been replaced with an image of him as a political revolutionary determined to help usher in the Kingdom of God, which for him was a new world order of transformed human, social, economic and political relationships. According to Hendricks, who is a professor of biblical interpretation at the New York Theological Seminary, Jesus was much less interested in the niceties of religious observances with their public displays of piety and prayer and far more concerned with the manner in which life was lived out in relationship with God and others. So he challenged the concentration of power and wealth that was invested in the hands of a few while the poor were left behind to fend for themselves. He broke with the official norms that decreed who was acceptable and who was not, who was pure and who was unclean, and instead associated himself with the outcasts: the tax collectors and the "sinners," and included women to be part of his inner circle.

He focused his healing powers on the physical, spiritual and emotional needs of the people, giving voice to the voiceless, championing their cause, and exposing the workings of oppression that held them down preventing them any upward mobility. He saw and identified evil for what it was and named it as such, and he saved his anger for the mistreatment of others. He took blows without returning them, and he didn't just explain the alternative—he demonstrated it. In so doing, he became a thorn in the side of the rich and the powerful, and those who felt threatened by his growing popularity among the masses finally decided to rid themselves of him. And so he was condemned by a kangaroo court made up of the ruling elite, was turned over to the occupying authorities on a charge

of sedition, and was crucified. He died, not for smelling the flowers on a quiet hillside in Galilee, but for seeking to realize the kingdom of God on earth.

This week, and particularly this weekend, has witnessed tens of millions of Americans and people in countries all over the world take to the streets in demonstrations of solidarity with women, racial minorities, and immigrant neighbors, raising their voices in protest of the proposed agenda of President Trump. If Jesus were to suddenly reappear in the flesh, what word of advice and counsel might he have for President Trump?

Unfortunately, we may never know because the president's spiritual direction is now in the hands of Paula White, the televangelist pastor and proponent of a prosperity gospel that offers no prophetic insights other than to say that God wants us all to be rich. She claims to have brought Trump to Christ years ago and that he has been "born again" and is now "right with God." But her interpretation of Christianity has subjected her to charges of being a "charlatan" and a "fraud" from some within her own religious circles, and while I suspect many of us would prefer to have Jesus advising Mr. Trump today instead of her, I fear it will not be. So America, and the rest of the world, will now have to wait to see how much, if any, of Jesus' progressive social and political agenda will be addressed in the days and years ahead. We've heard the talk but we've yet to see the walk.

Our President has rallied his supporters around a protectionist agenda of making America great again by promising to make and keep us number one in the world, to tear up international trade and other agreements that do not benefit us first and foremost, and by fanning the passions of popular nationalism over honoring the international partnerships and treaties meant to benefit us all. In the process, his words have often failed to honor our diversity as a nation and to promote the welfare of all our citizens regardless of their race, color, creed or gender, thus alienating large segments of the population. A few weeks ago, a group of representative clergy, over 5000 in number, signed an open letter to Mr. Trump asking to meet with him prior to his inauguration in order to share their concern and counsel with him. The meeting never happened. But in the letter, the group called upon Mr. Trump as President to uphold "the most sacred moral principles of our faith and constitutional values."

"We do not believe that these are either left or right issues. They are right or wrong issues. And while we know no human being is perfect, we wish to speak with you about these moral issues because far too much is at stake for you to succumb to your worst demons while in public office.

"Our faith calls us to love all people but this love can never refuse to tell the truth and stand against hate, systemic racism, and economic inequality. We cannot simply congratulate you on your victory and say, 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace. We are bound by our vows to tell the truth in love and stand together for justice, love and truth."

A few days later, their concerns were echoed in the remarks of Representative John Lewis when he effectively said to all Americans, "If you see or hear something that's unjust, immoral, and just plain wrong—stand up, speak out, fight for what's right!"

These words are well within the spirit of Jesus and are a gospel-call to action. They are also a recognition that peace is never a given but is a byproduct of community, of people working together, and for true community to exist there must be a willingness on

the part of all to work toward the common good. With malice toward none and with charity toward all, Abraham Lincoln turned the resources of this nation toward rebuilding a country torn apart by civil war, overcoming the bitterness of slavery, dismantling the walls of enmity, and binding up the wounds that had ripped families and the nation apart, knowing all along that a more perfect union was, and always will be, dependent on building the beloved community along with it, a community in which walls that divide no longer stand.

When the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Corinth, the church was fractured and divided. Immorality, licentiousness, and mean-spirited selfishness had torn away at the fabric of that community until it was in tatters. Various individuals had come forward, eager to claim a following and become the designated leader of the church, only creating further divisions. It was into that bitter and broken setting that Paul reasserted himself and called the church to repentance. Grief-stricken and ashamed, the congregation came together as one again, and then Paul wrote his second letter—the one from which we read this morning. In it he said;

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away . . . Everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to (God’s-Self) through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God’s appeal through us.”

Now few, if any of us, may ever be called upon to be a U. S. Ambassador to some other nation or exotic kingdom of this world. But we are not just citizens of this country; we are also citizens in the Imperial Realm of God, and in the latter we were automatically made ambassadors for Christ at the time of our baptism. An ambassador, as you know, is one who represents the interests of the sender, and since in our case it is God who has reconciled us and sends us forth, we now have the all-important task of representing God’s reconciling love to others. We are ambassadors for Christ, God making an appeal on behalf of love through us.

Love is sometimes regarded as a weak sentiment, as a luxury. But love is never a luxury; it is the profoundest need of humankind. On no other terms can human life sustain the mutual relationships into which, by its very nature, it is compressed. We don’t always have to “like” people to love them, but we do need to will and work for their greatest good. Agape love is not only a matter of the heart; it is a matter of the will. So with the assurance that “there is no fear in love, but that perfect love casts out fear”(I John 4:18), let us tear down the walls that divide us and come together in the spirit of God’s reconciling love that makes us all one. In the words of John Mohr:

*Let the walls come down
Let the walls that divide us
And hide us come down
If in Christ we agree
Let us seek unity
Let the walls come down
Let the walls come down.*

AMEN