

“November 9”
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First Congregational United Church of Christ
Romans 12: 9 – 21
November 6, 2016

Today we make our monthly pilgrimage to God’s table, to a meal that restores us the way no other meal can, gathered at a table so big we can’t see the end of it, by an invitation so generous we can’t imagine what we ever did to deserve it.

This time, we gather together around this holy meal well aware of the election that lies on the other side of it. I can’t wait for this election to be over. I dread this election. Those two things are completely true. I sense I am not the only one experiencing this tension. It feels like, among our national community, we are holding our collective breath to just get through Tuesday. “Just let it be over,” I find myself whispering, (praying), as I read yet another article, turn on the radio to hear yet another commentator, engage in yet another conversation with friend or stranger...it seems I can’t help myself, and I don’t think I’m alone.

But today we pause. We silence our phones, our Facebook fascination and our twitter feeds. Today we invite a Holy Spirit to still our worries and our anxious minds, for Sabbath claims us even when we are too consumed or too preoccupied with the world around us. No, we come to church and we practice being church and we open up our ancient text to see what truths claim us, center us, and will not let us go. Today it is a letter from Paul.

The apostle Paul wrote to a demoralized church in his letter to the Romans. Roman Jews had been expelled from Rome just a few years before Paul wrote his letter because they were causing disturbances that were instigated by *Christus*, as one early historian reported. The stories of Jesus were stirring the murky waters of corruption and all Jews were perceived as a threat, whether they were followers of Christ or not. So all Jews had been expelled from Rome. A few years later, as Jews were allowed to return to Rome, Paul wrote this letter. The Roman church was tired, contentious, weary of political turmoil that threatened their very existence. To them, Paul wrote a love letter: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve God. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

When the world shifts and shakes, unmoored by divisions of race, gender, scarcity and wealth, opportunity and exclusion, when truth is devalued and greed and disrespect is celebrated, we still stand on the bedrock of our ancient teachings. We bless and weep and set our ideas and thoughts to what is right and good for all.

We come to our Sabbath view to take another look at who we are and who we want to be. We remember that the great Source of resilience, which has carried us through all seasons of our life together, abides during the election and will wake with us as we open our eyes to the world that greets us the day after the election, November 9.

Like the aftermath of a college party gone terribly awry, on November 9 and long after we may very well be picking through the rubble, the consequences of this election season. Words that are used to cut like swords, truths bent to the breaking point, brokenness in so many ways and in so many places—in our system, in our communities, in our hearts.

When we wake on November 9 it will be to a world in which there is no illusion about the divisions and vastly divergent perceptions of our nation. Some of us, because of our families or workplaces or school communities, have long felt the burrowed—deep divisions in our national community. For some, the disparities of resources, access to power, the goodness/harshness of American life, our relationships with those who are different, have felt disjointed and untethered. This election cycle and the turmoil of our nation happening alongside have simply laid bare for all to see what has been there all along.

For others of us, there is a sense of the veil being pulled away and there are more questions than answers.

The deep pain, the anxiety and wild fears that have been laid open in this past year has held up one gigantic national mirror and some, though not all, of us are shocked to see what is staring back. And yet, no matter how we come to where we are now, we all share the question: what now?

While campaigns and election may be over on Tuesday, what we have learned about one another, our nation, ourselves, will not go away. There are deep wounds. There are

great needs. This is not a time we can squander with superficial understandings or defensiveness or dismissiveness.

In such a time as this, what does God require of us? What does Love require of us now?

I do not know what the world will look like when we wake, if we are blessed with sleep, on November 9. There are so many predictions, uncertainties, disasters foretold and triumphs presumed. What we do know about the results of the election is that we don't know. We don't know the decisions that will be made nor the unfolding consequences of all that will be.

So how do we greet the day on November 9? I wonder, as we seek wisdom from the One who created heaven and earth, is our response to that question even dependent on the results of the election?

This we do know: between here and there is a holy meal. The way we approach this table of Love holds, perhaps, a practice by which we approach this new day for our nation. For what we are doing now prepares us for whatever may come. The space we hold for God's miracle of love to unfold, the awareness we cultivate of how evil multiplies and divides, the ways that we pray for one another and peel away our defensiveness, the ways that we practice speaking truth, acting on truth, with unending love.

The table around which we gather, to which we are called, requires from us the release of pretense and defensiveness, replacing it with courage and serenity. The words of Invitation in the United Church of Christ Book of Worship may say it best: "Come to this sacred table not because you must, but because you may. Come not because you are fulfilled, but because in your emptiness you stand in need of God's mercy and assurance. Come not to express an opinion but to seek a presence and to pray for a spirit."

Perhaps the best preparation for how we shall face a new day on November 9 is how we prepare for the table around which we gather this morning to share a common loaf, to drink of a common cup, where we share a common prayer. We will know that we are never alone, just as the table around which we sit is shared by sisters and brothers the world over.

Could we approach this week asking God to rise to our best selves, our spirits not clenched in defensiveness but boldly curious, willing to listen to the hard truths that others carry, too often silently?

This meal is never really over because our hunger is constantly renewed. Mostly, none of us know when the very last meal will come, so we can say with certainty that the meal we consume only leads to another. So it is that we are called to this world to be a people resilient, and with spirits renewed, strengthened for the tasks of love... being ardent in spirit, patient in prayer, persevering in spirit.

What can we affirm, when so much is unknown, unkindled, hanging in the balance? We can be the church, with hands open and outstretched seeking connection and accountability, inviting vulnerability and compassion.

We can be the church and meet fear with love.
We can be the church, where love becomes relentless practice,
Practice that makes strong our will for good
and that's how we will know,
when eyes flutter open on November 9,
that we are awake.

Please pray with me:

God of all that was and is and ever will be, in this wild time hold us fast, not constrained but ready, ready to be your reflection of mercy, your voice of justice in a world where little makes sense but all is beloved.

Anchor us to your teachings, strengthen us for the hard work to which you call us, tether us to your word, renew in us a right spirit that is nimble and wise, no matter what. And hold us together, a people ever more fully becoming your Body, your bread, your cup of salvation to this broken and beautiful world. In the name of Jesus we pray, the One who shows us the way. Amen.