

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Easter 5  
May 19, 2019

## A More Excellent Way John 13:31-35

One of the greatest problems facing Christianity today is political anger. What can we as Christians in our various faith communities, contribute to a society which is bitterly divided on so many issues? Some scholars and community leaders worry that people are so divided that violence may become a more common response to conflict than non-violent protest, civil disobedience or even traditional forms of negotiations.

However, I think this can be a time of great opportunity for the Christian church to witness, perhaps not in the way in which we might think. Our greatest witness may not be in taking one position or the other. Like the world around us, the Christian church is divided on many of the same issues. Just to name a few: abortion, immigration, euthanasia, sexual orientation, race, constitutional issues. I do not think there will be easy or immediate answers to these questions for the church or for society.

But I do believe that in the midst of such difficult times there is a contribution that we can make. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, we can show “a more excellent way to live.” We can demonstrate how to deal with differences while maintaining a sense of community. We can engage in deeply felt conflicts without destroying one another.

The Apostle Paul continues in the same letter to the Corinthians to explain the more excellent way. He says, “If I speak in human or angelic tongues, but I am without love, I am a sounding brass and a clanging gong. I may have the gift of prophecy and know every hidden truth; I may even have faith strong enough to move mountains, but if I have no love, I am nothing. If I dole out all my possessions, or even give my body to be burned, if I have no love, I am none the better. In a word Paul says, “There are three things that last forever: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of them all is love.”

Yes, I believe the more excellent way is love. Now, not necessarily a warm fuzzy feeling, but a godly respect; a respect born of an understanding that others in the community of faith are persons who are loved and received by God even though we may deeply disagree with them.

The Christian church has always had deep, divisive differences even since Bible times. The New Testament has many examples of profound conflict in the life of the church. As it is for us today, somethings which divided the early church were about causation: this is when we seek to place blame for a terrible reality among us.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus and his disciples encounter a man who is blind. The disciples, drawing upon the popular theology of that time, asked Jesus, “Who sinned that this man was born blind, he or his parents?” Jesus replies, “His blindness is an opportunity for God to be glorified.”

Like most ancient people the disciples did not understand dreaded conditions such as blindness, especially when such conditions happened at birth. Their theology considered blindness to be caused by sin – either the victim’s sin or their parents’ sins. But Jesus’ reply to the disciples seems to say, “when the cause is not clear, what we can do is move beyond blame and minister in healing ways. This always glorifies God.”

In the early years of the AIDS epidemic I often found that some deeply religious students were so paralyzed by the need to see AIDS as God’s judgment upon homosexuals, that it was hard for them to minister to persons suffering with AIDS or to their families and friends. My concern was that God was not glorified in their need to blame. Love was absent. And love is what draws persons to God. And when we live on the premise of love, it has a way of smoothing the rough edges of our faith to fit more evenly into the graceful hands of God, where God can use us for God’s greater glory.

Another example we might consider has to do with cultural and political issues. Christians, like the general public, are deeply divided on moral and political issues, such as abortion. But none of the issues in this category or the issues that are facing the contemporary church could have been more sensitive or more divisive than the issues of whether Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law. We must remember that the first Christians, like our Lord Jesus, were Jews. At this point in Church history, Christianity was seen as a Jewish sect or cult.

As Paul and others began preaching in Gentile communities, more and more Gentiles were believing in the Gospel. But these new Gentile converts did not see the need to adhere to Jewish custom and law. Concerned leaders from the older Christian communities came to these new Gentile converts and taught that they could not be Christians if they did not observe the Jewish law and be circumcised.

Now that the Christian church is predominantly a Gentile church, this may seem like a trivial matter. But it was a bitterly divisive issue, and it gave rise to strong political feelings about who was a traditionalist and who was a liberal, or who was orthodox and who was a heretic. Today it would be like suggesting that one could be a Christian without requiring baptism. This was a strong controversy with the traditional side led by St. Peter and St. James and the other side led by St. Paul and St. Barnabas. But what impresses me most in the scriptural account in Acts is that the opponents were referred to as “believers.” Even though they were painfully at odds, there was an assumption that persons with opposing views could be believers.

As it is today, the issues and debates in the early church were many. But what seems to be clear as one reads the New Testament is that the church’s most important witness is not whether it is pro or con, but that it is able to sustain itself as a community in times of significant differences.

Of course, this has not always been true of the church. At times we have fought wars, burned people at the stake, and we have divided. But when commitment to love has been true, the church has been at its best and God has been glorified.

On the other hand, when our society is at its best it is often striving to be tolerant. How often have you heard someone say, “You must be more tolerant?” This may be the most an unredeemed world can hope for. However, I find that toleration can sometimes be nothing more than managed hostility. The polarization, bitterness and anger we see in our world have not only to do with the seriousness of the issues we face, but that we feel we can no longer manage our hostility towards those with differing views.

However, the Christian faith calls us to a higher, “more excellent way” than simply toleration. It calls us to hospitality; in the Greek it is “Zenophilia,” meaning fraternal respect for the one who is different. Respect takes the position: We may differ on this issue but I acknowledge that you are a person of faith – a Christian – an errant one, perhaps, but a Christian.

I am the youngest of 4 strong-willed children in my family. When I was growing up, we had all of the fights and arguments you can imagine of rambunctious kids.

Sometimes our disagreements would get so intense we would go to mom to have our conflicts ratified. She would often say to us, “You kids go back and resolve it, but remember you are all family.”

“But mom,” we would say, “he took my ball!” “Mom, she said I was a liar.”

“Mom, he broke the rules.” But she would always say, “Go back and resolve it and remember, you are family.” It was eventually clear to us that what was most important to mom was that we behave in such a way that demonstrated our bond as a family. This was even more important to her than our resolution, which she also expected.

I think this is what God says to the church. “I know you have differences, but you must struggle to resolve them as brothers and sisters. This is what I expect of you because you are my children.”

Jesus said it this way in the Gospel of John, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Love or having Godly respect for one another, does not suggest that we ignore our differences; respecting one another includes acknowledging sincerely held differences. Love means committing ourselves to the messy, frustrating and exhausting work of resolution but doing so without destroying one another and community.

Our convictions are important, especially convictions of faith. A community which lacks convictions, even differing convictions, lacks integrity. But, on the other hand, conviction without respect for community is simply blind passion and easily becomes abusive and destructive. The answers to deeply complex matters are never in political resolve but in the hard, prayerful work of consensus building among faithful people. In a community the goal is never political victory but the preservation of Christian mission and witness.

But what a crucial witness we can be to the world to testify that there is a more excellent way to deal with issues which divide us. Yes, this work is hard and we will make some mistakes and we will have some failures in the process. But I believe that God is more pleased by the witness we make in struggling to love and respect one another than the battles we wage to gain political victories.

There is a more excellent way and Christians are called to live it. For the example of how we deal with our differences can be a vital contribution to our polarized society.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...if you have love for one another.