

## **“E Pluribus Unum?”**

(A sermon following the election)

Colossians 3:12-15 (NRSV)

By John Gill

I usually try to write the bulk of my sermon fairly early in the week so I have time to refine it so that it says exactly what I want to say; but also, so I have time to prepare the PowerPoint for the sermon and get it to Megan by her Thursday deadline so she has time to insert it into the worship slideshow. (You may think the Senior Pastor is in charge of the church? Actually, Megan and Sharon are – I take my marching-orders from them!)

However, my sermon preparation this week was different than usual – as will be the sermon itself. I deliberately waited to begin writing my sermon until later in the week. In case you missed it, Tuesday there was a little election... and, on Thursday, as I sat down to write this sermon, the results were still unclear.

Of course, yesterday, all the networks and the Associated Press determined that Joe Biden had surpassed the 270 electoral votes needed for election. Certainly, there are court challenges that could change the results, but as of now, Joe Biden is expected to win the electoral college vote and be sworn in as president on January 20th. For some of you, that is good news – others of you may be in despair.

But whatever outcome you had hoped for, the American people have now spoken. For the most part, the election process was handled well across the country by those whose jobs it is to count and report every vote cast. Amidst all the accusations and warnings, our election system proved to be sound – and for that, we all should be grateful. Now, as the dust settles, it is assuring to know that Americans can still hold a presidential election, we can hope that all candidates and their supporters will accept the results.

In case you didn't realize it, Americans are very divided politically. We live in different “reality bubbles,” largely because of social media and 24 hour cable news networks. Americans tend to only listen to, or consider the views of, those who already agree with them. It didn't used to be this way. Unless you are below about 45 years old, you can remember when all Americans listened to the three broadcast networks for the news – and only for thirty minutes per day. No matter your political party, we all heard the same three news anchors recount the news of the day – then each of us made up our own minds what we thought about it. There was a time when Walter Cronkite was the most trusted person in America.

Not so anymore. Cable news networks blaring in our homes 24 hours a day have caused a rift, a widening chasm, in our society. Those who watch MSNBC never listen to Fox News, and those who only tune into Fox News never listen to MSNBC. Without making any judgment about the accuracy of what each station reports – the fact that we, Americans, are deliberately choosing to listen only to one side of the issues reflecting views that only reinforce perspectives we already agree with, means that we no longer can understand the perspective of our neighbors (or fellow church members), who may think and vote differently than we do. And social media has only exacerbated our divisions – because the algorithms that funnel news stories into your Facebook feed are designed to only post to your page memes and articles that reinforce the views you already have. Americans believe such different realities that we cannot even discuss issues with people we don't already agree with.

In addition to the impact of cable news and social media, our political parties have sown division in our nation. It used to be that Republican and Democratic legislators could debate furiously, but when it came to addressing the needs of the country we all share, they could negotiate and find common ground. Politicians on both sides of the aisle could argue and disagree on the floor of Congress, and then go out socially together, and even be friends. Their patriotism made them Americans first – and members of a political party second. We need to get back to those days!

George Washington, after two terms as president, steadfastly refused to run for a third term – even though many wanted to declare him a king. He set the precedent for all future presidents that, in a constitutional republic, it is essential that there be a peaceful and orderly transfer of power from one president to the next. In his farewell address to the nation, Washington offered a strong warning about the dangers of political infighting and the damage political parties can do. His words are eerily accurate in describing what we all have been living through these past few years:

“Let me... warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party... It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which finds a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions.”

This sad situation, that is tearing America (and even many congregations) apart, must be corrected if we are to survive as a nation. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln warned of the dangers of divisions in America leading up to the Civil War when he paraphrased the words of Jesus, saying, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Only a few years after Lincoln made that prophetic statement, America was embroiled in Civil War. In the lead-up to this election, there has been reckless talk that, unless “our candidate” wins, there will be Civil War. I hope and pray that cooler head will prevail – otherwise America may cease to exist as we have known it.

The preservation of the American Experiment in democracy is not guaranteed. Every generation must guard it and defend it. At the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin was asked by a citizen, “Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?” And Franklin replied, “A Republic, if you can keep it.” No, we must be constantly vigilant because the American Experiment in democracy is not guaranteed.

And, so, here we are in 2020. We have not listened to George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln – and we see the result.

Today is the Sunday before Veterans Day – and we thank all of you who have served our country honorably, and all those down through the centuries who have dedicated their lives to preserve our democracy. You have done your part to preserve our nation. We salute each of you!

But we are at a fragile moment in our history. If our nation does not come to its senses and find ways to unite in spite of our differences – if we cannot learn again the art of peaceful debate – if we refuse to acknowledge that all Americans, no matter their race, religion, language, national origin, or political views, are fellow citizens who have the same rights as we do – then there is little hope for the future of our country. To paraphrase Lincoln: We are a house-divided. We cannot stand, unless we stand together.

Would that we had heeded the warnings of Washington, Franklin, and Lincoln! But here we are... As a nation, we have chosen the path of discord and distrust, much to detriment of all our citizens. Washington predicted the cause of the problem. The challenge for us today is – how do we fix it?

As always, the Bible gives us the answer. In many passages, scripture gives us a roadmap to peace and unity in our nation – if we are willing to follow it. And, as Christians, it is our job to lead our neighbors to choose peace over violence, to choose unity over division, to choose hope over despair.

I could have chosen many texts for us to reflect on this morning – all of them speak hope to our nation – if we will listen and heed them:

From First Corinthians

*“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”*

From Romans 12

*“Live in harmony with one another; ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

I could go on and on. But the scripture passage I believe is most important for us to take to heart is from Paul’s letter to the Colossians (3:12-15). It is a word to the church at Colossae which was fractured by division. As Christians, it speaks powerfully to our politically divided congregation, to our denomination, and the larger Christian community in general. But it also reveals the secret to healing the wounds of our nation:

*“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.”*

Yes, even in this room (our congregation), we have different views on many issues, as was true of the church at Colossae. But, what scripture teaches us is that the secret to “unity” is not “uniformity.” John Wesley, the founder of Methodism called us to this “unity” when he wrote these words: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

As God’s beloved – “the Church” – we must always “seek to live in love with all people” – and we must challenge our nation to do the same.

The secret to unity is to love one another. It’s as simple as that. And what does “love” look like? compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness.

These are the “garments of love” the scriptures instruct us to “put on.” Only love can overcome the brokenness of our lives, our relationships, our congregation – even our nation.

The motto of the United States of America is the Latin phrase: “E Pluribus Unum” – “Out of Many, ONE.”

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