

Sermon Prepared for ABC

August 2-2020

Title: Agents of Peace - Being the church in challenging times

Thought of the day: *Micah 6:8 (NLT) No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*

Scripture passages: Micah 6, Galatians 5:13-26

Message: In a time of national division, we are called to be agents of peace.

Purpose: Challenge ABC to learn to be agents of peace in a culture of division.

Holy God, take these words and shape them for your purpose, teach us to know your ways, and fill our lives with your passion. Amen.

I should not need to remind any of you about the context of our world today. We live, as some have said, in unprecedented times. The challenge of a global pandemic; the intensified national - even global - conversation about racism, systematic injustice and inequality; and of course the political deluge looking towards a major election; all swirl together in our news feeds. If you have attempted to engage at all with people that disagree with you, then you have probably noticed how hard it is to agree - even - about the nature of the problems with our society, let alone what can be done about them.

I do not claim to have any of the answers to the questions that have been raised in the public sphere. My opinions are formed as much out of my ignorance as my knowledge or experience. My hope today is to share how I believe the Holy Spirit may be preparing us, in this time, to be agents of peace to a world of division.

Our text this morning is **Galatians 5:13-26**. I invite you to follow along as we walk through it together.

¹³*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity to indulge your flesh, but through love serve one another.* ¹⁴*For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment, namely, "You must love your neighbor as yourself."*

Immediately we are on the hook as a society. We care a lot about "freedom" in this country. But Paul reminds us here that we ought not use freedom as an excuse to do whatever we want, rather we are to love our neighbor. Everything we learn today is built on this foundation. Whatever we do in response to this pandemic, to address racism or injustice, or any other issue that comes up, we must respond in accordance with the call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

¹⁵*However, if you continually bite and devour one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.*

Stop right there!

I know pastor Keith worked through Galatians recently, but I must have missed this verse. We know there was a rumor during the Roman persecution that Christians were cannibals. Something about the body and blood of Christ must have turned some of the Gentiles queasy, but maybe this verse confused people as well.

I'm going to take this as an opportunity to talk about how some people argue about whether we should read the Bible literally or figuratively -as if the Bible can be treated as one type of literature! I always say in response that we should read the literal parts literally and the figurative parts figuratively (duh). Jesus was literally crucified, buried and raised again. But the early church was only metaphorically biting and devouring each other.

So what does this verse mean if it is metaphorical?

The word devour is used in other places, for example, in the parable of the sower, when the seeds sown on the path are devoured by the birds. But the Greek word translated as "bite" is used nowhere else in the New Testament. We know its meaning from other Ancient Greek texts. It literally means to bite with teeth, but it is used metaphorically to mean "wound the soul," or "rend with reproaches." In this way it speaks to the destructive power of words.

Remember that in Galatians Paul is confronting Christians who are falling into division, arguing about who the best leader is, or whether or not Gentiles should get circumcised. In the passion of their debates, they were attacking each other with words that tear down, insults that destroy.

My brothers and sisters, what would Paul say if he spent an hour reading one of our social media profiles? How quick are people to bite and devour one another with snarky comments, and scathing commentary. Let us not be this way.

We will return to this point later, but for now let us finish the passage.

Picking up in verse 16:

¹⁶But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh, for these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, ²¹envying, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things. I am warning you, as I had warned you before: Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God!

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Now those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also behave in accordance with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, being jealous of one another.

The word of the LORD

Now, I have read that list of vices, and others like it, many times, and each time I am convicted of a different "work of the flesh". In our present moment I am sensitive to hostility, strife, dissensions and factions. For some reason I would never have put these sins on the same list as sexual immorality or murder, but here they are. If we are to be agents of peace, we must root out such things.

As one commentator put it:

"Happy would it be, if Christians, instead of biting and devouring one another on account of different opinions, would set themselves against sin in themselves, and in the places where they live." Let me repeat that because it is a double whammy. Happy would it be, if Christians, instead of biting and

devouring one another *on account of different opinions*, (ok we have talked about that) would set themselves against sin *in themselves*, **and** in the *places where they live*.

This commentator is getting at the key to being agents of peace. If we develop this thought, I believe our task will be clear. But we have to ask what setting ourselves against sin in ourselves and in the places where we live means. As we think again about the context of our time, of the world as it is, I think that we as Christians face three temptations, or obstacles, in the way of becoming agents of peace.

In some ways we have already talked about the **first temptation** which we as followers of Christ face in times of discord, polarization, and strife: the temptation to attack those with whom we disagree instead loving them. Paul will go on to say in chapter 6 that we are to bear one another's burdens and restore those who have sinned gently. Anger and yelling rarely change anyone's mind, all it will do is make us feel better about ourselves *at someone else's expense*.

Remember what Paul says in Verse ²⁶*Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, being jealous of one another*.

The second temptation is to ignore the call to set ourselves against sin around us. It is the temptation of complacency.

This temptation is particularly easy to give in to when we are dealing with political issues. We don't like getting involved, it's messy and complicated. How much easier is it to just stay above the fray, to wash our hands of the issue.

Recently, in light of the national discussion about systematic racism, we on the church board have started educating ourselves about the issues, listening to a variety of voices. Our concern is that we do not want to do nothing, and miss the opportunity to love our black brothers and sisters. Perhaps there is a way to help carry their burden. Perhaps there are underlying systems of injustice here in our community that need to be dealt with.

It is early in this time of exploration. I believe Pastor Keith is planning on speaking into this as well. All I am saying today is that *it is a mistake to think that we can do nothing and thus "stay neutral"*. To do nothing in the face of injustice, especially from a position of privilege, is to placidly endorse the status quo.

On the other hand, we must watch out for the **third temptation**, which is to act symbolically and think, in our arrogance, that doing so will solve the problem. The sign in our yard, or the bumper sticker on our car, or the copy and pasted status on our Facebook page all mean nothing if we are unwilling to undertake the real work, the hard conversation and negotiation it is going to take to solve a problem.

Again, the issue in the back of my mind today is the black lives matter movement, but there are countless other issues we could point to in our culture. Issues where it seems easy and rewarding to pick a side and jump on the bandwagon, yet it is frequently the case that the bandwagons travel only in circles or that there is more talking than action.

I have spoken in other settings about this temptation, and that the alternative is to form *actual relationships* with people who share little in common with us.

As Jay Shifley pointed out a few weeks ago, this is also a good opportunity to pull some weeds, that is, get people thinking about God, and let the Holy Spirit nurture the right questions. I would just like to add that it is ok to seek out people to help pull our own weeds.

It is only after we have gotten to know people that we can begin to understand how, for example, systematic injustice affects someone – because then we will be able to put a face to it. Or how a privilege I might not even know I have looks to someone who lives in a different world because of their gender, or the color of their skin, or where they come from.

The middle road between jumping on a bandwagon and doing nothing is less exciting, takes longer and requires much more work. It is an investment in the lives of our neighbors that will pay off in the long run.

So, to review, the three temptations that will distract us from being agents of peace are first *to do nothing* - to be complacent, second to get so riled up that we *attack those we disagree with*, and third to simply *jump on a bandwagon* with people who think like us and to think that a few symbolic actions will make real change.

As the Prophet Micah wrote: *"The Lord has told you, Oh mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."*

There it is:

Act justly - do not be complacent. Set ourselves against sin in ourselves and in the places we live. Look for ways to root out that sin and kill it.

Love mercy - do not tear down those who disagree with us, love them and share their burdens. Be merciful as our Heavenly Father has been merciful to us.

Walk humbly with our God - it will not be flashy, there is no bandwagon to jump aboard. To walk with the spirit is to keep in step with the spirit.

In practice this will mean spending time with people that see the world differently than we do and listening to them and loving them. It may occasionally mean admitting that we were wrong. It will mean deferring to God for wisdom instead of relying on our own.

Your mission this week, should you choose to accept it, is to pray for the people who rile you up. The ones you know you disagree with. Then give them a call or send them a note and try to start a real conversation. Be willing to learn and listen and begin to understand where they come from. Who knows what barriers the Holy Spirit will topple?

Please stand as we pray.

Lord Jesus, the call to love our enemies is hard for us to accept. It is so much easier to despise them. Yet you teach that there is no "us and them", that we are all your children, that you desire each and every one of us to experience your love and forgiveness. Grant us the strength, as we go, to share the forgiveness you have given us with those we meet along the way. Help us to be a voice of calm in a world of chaos, and people of unity in a world of division. Make us an instrument of your peace Lord Jesus, we ask in your holy name, Amen

Benediction:

Act Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly. And may the God of peace guide you as you go.