

Sermon Text for March 15, 2020

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Psalm 133, Acts 23:6-10
“When our agendas divide us”

My dear First Presbyterian family and friends, that’s how I address each of the emails that I send out to you, and besides this medium which we are now trying to get in working order, it will probably be the way in which we interact with each other for the next few weeks. How are you? I wish I could speak to you individually, each one of you face to face and make eye contact with you so that when you respond you are fine I would be able to see if you really are or if you are not. We miss each other right now, but we also will find a way to remain the body of Christ, and, I hope, come out of this even stronger as we recognize that which holds us together ultimately is the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ. Without his love we are just a shell of a family. With his love we are a family that is looking to thrive and grow and is full of energy. That will not change.

So, really, how are you? How is this time in our history, a time that none of us has ever experienced, how is it affecting you? Martin Luther, the great reformer, not the great civil rights leader, this guy Martin Luther was about 400 years or more before MLK. Martin Luther who was instrumental in spearheading the Reformation also lived during and through the bubonic plague. Here is what he had to say as he was living through the plague, a plague that was incredibly deadly: "I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."

Not a bad statement for us today. I will be wise, but if my neighbor needs me I will go to my neighbors aid. He expresses a certain unity in that statement that speaks to neither tempting God while at the same time loving God and loving neighbor. There is a bond which unites us as a family, it is what ought to be first and foremost on our most and it will direct and guide our

actions in this very confusing time. That bond is that we are each striving to be a better follower of Jesus Christ even in this time. Just because nothing seems to be where it should be doesn't mean that we abandon our faith and our pursuit of the pleasure of God. No, in fact, it is the most stabilizing force that there can be in our life, it has to be the primary agenda of our lives which not only gives our life meaning, but which keeps us united, and that is the love of Jesus Christ. Paul understood this even while he was faced with imminent danger. Let's read. I'm going to read both of the Scriptures today starting with Psalm 133.

READ

When you read Psalm 133 what image comes into your mind? I have to admit I read this Scripture very differently than I did even on Monday when I first looked at the words: how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. On Monday I read it one way, and then these past few days I started to read it: when kindred live together in unity by social distancing. But isn't there some truth that unity does not require physical contact. There is no necessity for physical contact in this psalm from person to person. Unity between people is described as this blissful state when an individual is enjoying the finer things in life, but all of it is put up to the comparison of the absolute finest thing in life which is being in God's presence in eternal life.

It is good and pleasant when we are able to be together in unity, like we are now, but there are no words to describe what it is like to be in God's presence in everlasting life. During our time apart it is going to be a challenge to find ways in which we can express our unity together as a family. Every week we express our unity as we pray the Lord's prayer together, we can do that here. Every week we express our unity as we sing songs of praise together. I'm not going to put you through that since it is just me. Every week we express our unity as we give of our tithes and our offerings together. Yeah, we are going to need your help on that one. But when we gather together physically it is less of a challenge to put into action our unity together. It almost comes naturally. We are going to have to work at it together during our time apart. I hope you are up to that challenge. Because when we are able to experience that together there is nothing better except being in God's presence in heaven.

Paul had his own issues with unity, at least in the Scriptures that we have been reading about lately. It almost seems like he was willing to trade unity for truth. That sounds pretty convincing, until you find someone, like Jesus, who was able to do both, especially as we read it

was so important to him that he prays to his father that we would be one. Jesus so wants us to be one, and yet he knew that this was going to be a challenge.

Let's look at Paul in our Scripture today. Once again we find him in front of a group of people who are not too happy with him and he is trying to defend himself. As we make our way through our Scriptures we see the situation deteriorate, as it often does when Paul is trying to defend himself, until finally at the end the mob is looking to kill him and once again the soldiers have to come and defend him. This is exactly what happened in the Scripture that we read last week. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

But what happened to cause the stir which almost gets Paul killed? Open your Scripture and let's look at the verses. The Scripture seems to imply that Paul spoke of the resurrection just to get the people riled up. Let's set the stage a little bit. Paul, before he knew Jesus, was a Pharisee who was responsible to track down and kill Christians. On the road to Damascus Jesus in a vision met him and convicted him and Paul in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, went from accuser to lover of Jesus. But his past was still a part of him. He grew up a Pharisee, he knew what it meant to be a Pharisee, he knew all the traditions, as we said last week, his tribe was the tribe of the Pharisees.

Part of being a Pharisee is that you dislike the Saducees. Kind of like being a Eagle fan part of your DNA is to dislike, that's a nice word, any Cowboy fan. That's why so many of us have such a good relationship. Talk about unity..., but I digress. So in our Scripture today we find Paul in front of the leaders of the Jewish people, they were a combination of Pharisees and Saducees, and he says to them: I am a Pharisee, not I am a Christian who grew up as a Pharisees, but I am a Pharisee. Then, he points out the one issue that was central to the divisions between the Pharisees and the Saducees, the resurrection. Pharisees believed in it, and the Saducees did not.

When we first read it it seems like he said it just to get them arguing so that they would forget about him. It almost seems like he speaks about what is on their agenda, front and center, as a ploy to get them to argue and forget about him. In fact, it almost works as one of the Pharisees says: maybe this Paul isn't such a bad guy after all. But I don't think Paul was trying to be shifty. I think Paul only knew how to speak about Jesus in light of the resurrection of Jesus. The primary purpose of Paul's preaching, the number one thing on his agenda, was the resurrection of Jesus. Nothing was more important. What Paul was able to do was to turn this

trial into a testimony. Paul is sharing the hope for Israel's messianic kingdom which is founded through the resurrection.

Over and over again we read Paul speak about the resurrection in other places, like I Corinthians 15:13-14. Romans 6:5, and Philippians 3:10-11, and others.

Paul's agenda was primarily Jesus Christ and the love that he has for us so that we would be raised from the dead in the resurrection to be with him. There was nothing more important for him to tell people about. As a result he could not hold back when he was in front of a group of people, he had to say what was the most important thing on his agenda, Jesus. And that caused disunity, that caused people to be upset.

There are times that churches have agendas which divide themselves. If you just look at the sacraments that is the case. In every new member class when we go over theology I always say that when you look at the sacraments there are always more aspects of them that unite us than what separate us. When we talk about baptism what unites us is the water that is used which creates a new creation, the past is finished and gone. We have that in common. That is where we find our unity.

When we talk about communion it is easy to focus on what divides us about this sacrament. But why not focus on what unites us which is that every single Christian, every single denomination believes that when you take communion Jesus is present. Let's focus on that, why do we have to then stick to our agendas when we try to describe how Jesus is present, that divides us. Let's keep that to ourselves. Let's just focus on what unites us.

Rachel is home, I picked her up yesterday, and she shared something with me which was really disturbing. She has a coworker who is Korean American, so Asian-American and she sat down on the subway keeping the social distancing protocol and when she sat down the people closest to her got up and walked to the other end of the subway. Rachel's housemate is Chinese American and he is afraid to go outside of their apartment because a block away from where they live an Asian American was attacked and told to go home and take the virus with you.

Some of us have an agenda through which we see the world and it leads us to actions that would make God weep. They are agendas that divide us. They are agendas that when looked at carefully could only be seen as foolish. But what I would like for you to do as we gather from afar is to remember to only post positive this Lenten season. This Lenten Season remember that you are a citizen of heaven. This Lenten season remember that your agenda first and foremost is

to celebrate Jesus who has given you eternal life. If we are able to focus on this, our common agenda, then we will be united. We will be able to enjoy that eternal life that is promised to us, and we will be able to love God and neighbor as we ought.

Our common agenda, Jesus the Christ, unites us and makes us stronger. Amen.