Can There Be Unity without

Accountability and Justice?

(And a reflection of the tactic of deflection.)

*Joshua 24:14-15 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa January 17, 2021*

Today, I struggle with balancing the paradox of the prophetic call to speak truth to power in declaring that there can be no unity without accountability and justice, and the pastoral call to seek and live in unity with others, all others. I suspect many of you are dealing with the same internal struggle, the same paradox. But perhaps that shouldn’t be too much of a surprise, for the scriptures are filled with such both/and, non-binary paradoxes.

This sermon is really part two of last week’s, entitled, “Insurrection and the Cult of Personality.” I attempted to address some of the issues that led to the attack on our U.S Capitol on January 6, emphasizing the fact that words matter, and that a person reaps what they sow. I joined those in countering the mantra, “This is not who we are as a nation”, with the reality that time and time again our history proves that is indeed who we are, and always have been, even though we may be unaware or pretend otherwise. That led to that sermon’s closing admonition, “As people of faith, our call is to be part of the resistance that speaks up and takes action against the silence, the complicity, and yes, the evil of toxic dominance, distorted masculinity, and white supremacy. May God strengthen us in the resolve and capacity needed for these efforts.”

This sermon is an attempt to deal with our response, our call to action. For those of us who claim to be followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, we cannot ignore his command:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?

(Matthew 5:43-48)

Is there anyone else struggling with those words at the moment, especially when it comes to radicalized right-wing extremists and those, often through the complicity of their silence, who have done nothing but to encourage their beliefs and actions? That is why it was so infuriating when those on the “other side” responded to the insurrection with the **age-old tactic of distraction through deflection**, often used by an oppressor, including by the aggressor in an abusive relationship.

**How many times have we heard a call to unity this past week?** Here are some typical responses. Congressman Mark Wayne Mullins from here in the Tulsa area stated, “I voted no on the Article of Impeachment today. This does not help us move forward as a country and only further divides us. All of us must do better.” Congresswoman Michelle Fischback from Minnesota stated, “I just voted against impeachment. With fewer than seven days remaining in this administration, we should be focused on moving forward and getting back to work on behalf of the American people.” And Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, “We must come together and put this anger and division behind us.” My question to him: Where do you suppose this anger and division that led to insurrection came from in the first place?

To bring this hypocrisy out into the open, I stated on my Facebook page on Monday, January 11: “Calls for ‘unity’ are hollow without the pursuit of justice and accountability!” Then, on Thursday, I posted a political editorial cartoon that expressed this deflection perfectly. It shows a bashed-in Capitol building with an elephant standing over it and holding a baseball bat saying, “**In lieu of accountability, I’d like to suggest unity and healing**.” (interlock hands) **Let’s not be fooled, this is a classic example of deflection** – hey, look over there, let’s talk about something else, something positive, instead of facing the real issue at hand. **Let’s talk about being unified as a country rather than how we helped participate in stoking the toxic atmosphere that led to sedition and insurrection**. Yes, it’s the classic coping and defense mechanism of those who refuse to take responsibility, those who refuse to be held accountable, and those who want to maintain their self-defined image as a ‘good person’.

**Deflection is the attempt to change the subject and draw attention away from oneself (or political party) in order to hide one’s own mistakes by blaming others.** And yes, to one extent or another, we all do it, sometimes almost unintentionally, or just automatically. **Deflection continues to be the go-to response in most, if not all, instances of racism and white supremacy. This is what privilege looks like**. Remember, Jesus never said, “Just move on and let’s pretend that didn’t happen.” No, Jesus was an agitator and he addressed conflict head on – without deflection – and so must we.

**So, how do we address this crisis of unity in our country? First, by demanding truth-telling, accountability, and real justice.** The immediate impeachment of President Donald J. Trump for inciting insurrection was a good first step.There must be a price to pay for telling lies, spreading lies, or not correcting lies, in order to manipulate others for the purpose of maintaining power and control. Narcissistic self-interest must eventually pay the piper.

In this country, we have sadly moved beyond just having differences of opinion with each other and disagreements in ideologies and worldviews. It looks like we’ve reached the point of **divergent realities** in how we understand just about anything. **Perhaps hardest to understand is why what some consider blatant lies are perceived as the gospel truth to others. How do we deal with that?**

**Erin Wathen** in an article on patheos.com entitled, “Whose Flag Do You Carry?” writes, “A basic disconnect between what is true and actually happening, and a network of lies, propaganda and misinformation so deep and complex that it will take extraordinary acts of courage, humanity, and leadership to begin extricating them.” And in relation to the article’s title about whose flag you carry, she notes the insurrectionists carried into our U.S. Capitol not only American flags, Trump flags, confederate flags, NRA flags, Blue Lives Matter flags (how ironic given their brutal and deadly assault on Capitol police officers), Nazi flags and symbols of other hate groups including a flag of sedition, but there were also **Christian flags**. The signs of the cross. The variations of “Jesus saves” and “Jesus is my savior, Trump is my President.” And the giant centerpiece that just said, “Jesus 2020.” Some carried Bibles in their hands as they walked through the corridors of the Capitol. Some chanted, “The blood of Jesus covering this place.”

I don’t suppose any of us who pay attention to such things were surprised by this. In fact, it was quite predictable. **Christianity has been infiltrated by Trumpianity, the newest form of American Christian nationalism, and now confirmed as a clear and present danger to our democracy, and to the very lives of others**. I addressed that some last week in a reflection on the sin of idolatry that’s especially rampant among many radicalized, right-wing, conservative, white evangelical pastors, and those who follow them. Speaking personally, **I want accountability and justice before I can even think about how to live in unity with those who have so distorted the ways and teachings of Jesus. The Jesus they preach is not the Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus I choose to follow.** If you’re interested, google “Evangelicals and the Insurrection.”The strange bed-fellows and transactional relationship between many white evangelicals and Trump is deeply misguided and dangerous.And yet. And yet, instead of just simple condemnation, **I think we should be drawn to try to understand why**. There are deep and complex reasons why the insurrectionists, for example, chanted “Hang Mike Pence,” an undoubtably card-carrying conservative Christian.

Let me draw this in a bit closer now. **How do we address this crisis of unity in our own families** – whether they be biological, chosen, or our community of faith? This is pastorally addressed in a blog this week by author and activist (and speaker at our congregation’s Harold Hill Lecture Series a few years ago) **John Pavlovitz**. Entitled, “America isn’t Facing a Violent Civil War, But a Relational Cold War,” he reflects upon “the great pulling away happening right now in America.” He writes:

We are at the threshold of our collective tolerance for interpersonal conflict and nearing a point of no return.

There’s only so many times you can attempt to contest someone’s fantastical conspiracy theory with facts they refuse to acknowledge,
only so many terse and extended text exchanges you can endure,
only so many family meals punctuated by profanity you can sit through,
only so many talking point tirades your reserves of compassion and patience can sustain.

Eventually the exhaustion takes over and the noise and bombast give way to distance and silence: the unfriending and ghosting and the disconnection slowly begin to fully separate us.

In the days ahead, it will not be the screaming volume that will show us how fractured we are, it will be strange quiet.”

I have heard from some in this congregation that this is exactly what’s happening in their extended family. Instead of a militaristic civil war, Pavlovitz states, “What’s increasingly clear when people tell me their stories, is that a new kind of ***relational cold war*** is far more likely: that the coming season in America will be marked by emotional distance where close proximity once existed. It will be made of empty chairs and blocked social media accounts and separate holidays and protracted non-communication. It will be a widening divide created by profound moral incompatibilities, revealed in ways that would not have existed in any other circumstances.”

Pavlovitz continues, “I suppose in this way, the past four years have been a bittersweet gift to us: a pulling away the curtains of decorum and phony civility, allowing us to see people’s hearts with clarity. We can no longer hide behind the stories we thought were true about those we love and share life with, and about the place we live. We’ve all shown what sides that we are on and the hills that we’re willing to allow relationships to die on.”

At seeing this happening, I’m sure that God is the first to weep over our refusal to love one another, even our enemies. Hopefully, with God’s help, we can all find ways back into relationship, even if it means agreeing to not talk about politics and religion, a somewhat unspoken contract I have with my own brothers and sister.

Our challenge, according Erin Wathen in her article, is this: “to decide again what flag we will carry. What is the sign and symbol of our lives? What do we want our friends and neighbors to see in our words and actions, and who will we choose to be in the midst of such tumultuous times? Something about the words [from Joshua 24] “**choose this day whom you will serve**” come to mind… But it is not just about choosing, in some abstract philosophical sort of way. It is about choosing, and then acting upon, in a way that is clear and visible. In a way that transforms our communities, and claims the public witness of Jesus followers as one of healing and restoration.” And I would add, one of restitution and reparations.

**So, can there be unity without accountability and justice? No, and yes.** It’s the paradox of a both/and rather than a strict either/or. It’s simply not that binary. It’s kind of like what came first, the chicken or the egg. **We must strive and work for both unity and justice *simultaneously*, as hard as we know that will be.**

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, let us take to heart his quote, “**I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear**.”

Amen.

Resources:

Jan Edmiston, “Something Jesus Never Said: “Let’s Pretend Like That Didn’t Happen”. A Church for Starving Artists blog, January 8, 2021.

John Pavlovitz, “America isn’t Facing a Violent Civil War, But a Relational Cold War”, personal blog, January 14, 2021.

Erin Wathen, “Whose Flag Do You Carry?”, patheos.com, January 10, 2021.

