

Series: Finding Peace in the Purple
Sermon: Being a Purple Church
Scripture: Romans 12:1-5, 9-21

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***1** I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. **2** Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. **3** For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. **4** For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, **5** so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. **9** Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; **10** love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. **11** Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. **12** Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. **13** Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. **14** Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. **15** Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. **16** Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. **17** Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. **18** If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **19** Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." **20** No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." **21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Many years ago, I attended a tiny rural church for about a year. As I began to meet people at the church, I noticed two things. First, almost all of them had the same last name. Now, I don't want to say their last name, we will just call them the Bethany's. The other thing I noticed was even though they had the same last name they didn't all appear to be related. They would introduce themselves by saying, "I'm Joe Bethany with an "a..n..y." Then someone else would come up and say, "I'm Jim Betheny with an "e..n..y." Interesting, I thought. Then one day I'm talking to Joe and Jim and they mention they are related, distant cousins. I said, "Oh, I didn't think you were related since you spell your last names differently. And just as matter of fact as can be, one of them said, "Oh no, we are the same family, our great grandfathers were brothers. Mine was a staunch democrat, and his was a staunch republican. They argued over politics so bad that one day my great grandfather got so upset he decided to change the spelling of his name so nobody would think he was related and had the same politics as is brother." It stuck. Such is the power of "red" and "blue" to divide us.

Of course, politics isn't the only thing that divides us, but it is the predominate thing as we head into a new election season, and while the cousin's story reminds us that division along political lines is nothing new, it seems that the political climate for the past ten years or so has felt particularly polarized.

We could debate for months over why this is the case. Some blame social media and the quick access to false or inflammatory information that can easily be shared. Some blame the influence of outside enemies like Russia or China. Some blame the growing mistrust of politicians who have been elected to serve the people but have instead done more to serve themselves. We can blame all day long, or we can work to change it...or at least to change how we react to it – whatever this “it” is that is causing us to look at one another and see an enemy instead of a neighbor.

The political rhetoric that once seemed harmless bantering and bickering, now feels threatening and ominous as we watch the news and hear both sides convincing us to be afraid of each other. We have declared only one side can truly love God, only one side must truly love the country, only one side is good... therefore the other side must be ungodly, hateful, evil. We have allowed the rhetoric of politicians and newscasters to shape our beliefs about others and generate a fear that now becomes the lens through which we see one another. Then, in order to keep us from seeing each other as neighbor, we dehumanize one another. We start by belittling people with name calling and shaming. We let bullying behaviors then blind us to the fact that “those animals” are indeed our neighbors, our coworkers, our fellow church members, even our own family...instead, they are enemies and deserve to be treated as such.

We determine that knowing someone’s political party means we understand them and are justified in judging them, without really sitting down and having a conversation with them in which we listen to understand. It feels like every day the wedge drives deeper and the split becomes wider.

When we separate ourselves from one another in this way, it is a sure sign that we have conformed to the world, rather than been transformed by Christ. As Jim noted earlier, the Apostle Paul often dealt with divisions within the church and many of his letters reflect advice on how to hold differing opinions but still remain in loving relationships with one another. Unity over uniformity. Founder of Methodism, John Wesley, taught the early Methodists the same lesson when he preached: “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.” Unity, not uniformity.

We notice that both Paul and Wesley are quick to remind us, we are a family. We are children of God. We are brothers and sisters. And while we don’t have to think alike, we can all love alike.

Paul writes that we should be sacrificial in our living, holy and acceptable to God. This means, we don’t always have to be right, but we do always have to be discerning.

“Do not be conformed by this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good, acceptable and perfect.”

When we are conformed by the world, we are assured we are right, and any other opinion is wrong. When we are transformed by Christ, we don't think too highly of ourselves to believe we have all the right answers. We take time to understand that others might have insight worth listening too.

When we are conformed by the world, we are told it is acceptable to love only those like you, to hate those that are different, and that harsh treatment, even violence, is justified by our righteousness. To be transformed by Jesus, however, means love is genuine for all humanity, we will be discerning of what is true evil and tighten our grip on what is good, loving and honoring each other along the way.

To be conformed by the world means we become zealous in our beliefs and ready to battle our neighbor over them. To be transformed by Christ means our zeal is reserved for serving God by rejoicing in hope, being patient in suffering, persevering in prayer, showing generosity to all, extending hospitality to strangers, and blessing the ones who persecute you.

To be conformed by the world means feeling justified in name calling, hatred, and ridicule of others. To be transformed by Christ is to live together empathetically and compassionately. Laugh with each other...weep together when necessary.

To be conformed by the world is to push others away and demand one voice, our voice, is the only one that matters. To be transformed by Christ is to live in harmony with one another, which we can only do if we are humble and willing to seek wisdom rather than claim it. It is to live peaceably, while the rest of the world screams its battle cry.

To be conformed by the world is to declare that those different than us don't deserve any kindness. To be transformed by Christ means, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink..."

Brothers and sisters, there should be only one way to spell "Christian." We can't change a letter and distance ourselves from one another if we are truly transformed in the love and peace of Christ.

Paul says, "live in harmony" with one another. Do you realize that harmony can't exist without multiple voices coming together? Harmony is the ability to use diversity to create something beautiful. It is many voices singing different notes in the same key,

creating music, song. Harmony is many voices speaking different ideas with the same intent to love.

Friends, will we be conformed by the news we watch and the political pandering we listen to.... or will we be transformed by the love of Christ to see each other as brother and sister, neighbor and friend?

The easy thing for us to do is to retreat to our red and blue sides and wait for the bell to ring so we can come out swinging at each other, but being transformed by Christ is find peace in the purple...in the places of our lives where red and blue come together....which is in our homes, in our workplace, in our community gatherings, and yes, even in our church.

We exist in a purple world, and we are told we have to separate into red or blue, but honestly...purple is a lovely color and a lovely place to live. In the church, we use purple as the liturgical color of Lent and Advent...both times that invite the church into deep spiritual reflection. So, as we approach this election, lets approach it with some deep spiritual reflection.

Look around you...look across the aisle...as you drive home, look at your neighbors and the political signs in their yards...look and see your brother and your sister, your neighbor and your friend...right there in the purple.

The key to finding peace there is to stay in relationship with one another, to listen to one another, not just talk at one another...to have conversations in which we seek to understand not to be understood.

Each week of this series you will have a discussion card to take home. It has a summary of these weeks teaching, a prayer, and three questions you can discuss with someone of a different political party than your own. We will be focused on one of these questions for our weekly discussion group every Wednesday evening. This Wednesday, at the library. Come, bring a friend, neighbor, coworker with you and let's work hard not to let the red and blue divide us...but to come together in the purple and be intentional about finding peace.