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Purple Church? What? Why?

Matthew 13:24-30

John 13:34-38

So, the Halloween candy and decorations are on full display now, so you know what that means? The secular Christmas season is about to kick into high gear. Right? The fall is upon us and as the inevitable crush of seasons bears down on us, I'd like to consider how followers of Jesus should approach all that is coming at us this fall. I have two particular events in mind, that – I think – deserve some theological reflection and challenge. The two events that I know will come to all of us – ready or not – are Thanksgiving and the official kick-off of the US Election season. And what both of these events/seasons have in common is that they bring us together with others who don't see the world as we/you/I see it and who argue vociferously for particular political agendas with which we disagree.

It is not news that our world, our churches and our families are becoming increasingly polarized and divided. But, how to live as followers of Christ in such a world, church and family is what I want to try to address over the course of four Sundays. I intend to forgo the normal lectionary scripture assignments and attempt to propose practices, disciplines and strategies that I hope will help live as faithful disciples of Christ in an age that is most concerned to define teams and to pull against each other at all costs. And I want to try to do that over the course of four Sundays. Today and next Sunday. Then, we will celebrate World Communion Sunday on the first Sunday in October. Then, I will return to this theme for October 13 and 20.

And the way I want to introduce this topic is by talking about what it means to be a Purple Church. I did not make this image up. Someone else thought of it first. But, a good case can be made that what our nation needs from the Christian Church in our age is an example of what it means to be a Purple Church made up of purple Christians. It is this theme that I hope to explore over the course of four weeks.

Briefly, I want to make the case that Forest Lake Presbyterian Church is and should continue to be defined FIRST AND FOREMOST by our commitment to Christ. This means that we are not first and foremost defined by our political affiliations. One of the things that I value most about this congregation is that we include a fairly diverse group of folks – obviously we could be much more diverse. But, in this context, it is encouraging to me that we include almost some of everyone: USC/Clemson, male/female, black/white/brown, immigrant/Columbia natives,

gay/straight, Republican/Democrat/Independent, right brain/left brain, and feelers/thinkers. You have heard me say before that when I review history – and particularly the history of the Christian Church – what is clear is that the Church makes its most awful and costly decisions when the leadership surrounds themselves only with those who look like them, think like them, and agree with them.

We live in an age that is very quick to put people in boxes or on teams – to force people to “choose sides” and identify with one side of an argument against another. And, when polarization becomes the primary way in which we identify ourselves and others, then I find that group think rather than thoughtful examination tends to be the rule.

So, I want to propose that Forest Lake Presbyterian Church embrace our wonderfully minority position of being a Purple Church. We are not only Democrats or Republicans, but we are both and something else. We are not only conservatives or progressives, but we are both and something else. We are not only red or blue, but we are both and something else. We are not only Clemson fans and USC fans, but we are both and something else. And it is that “something else” that I want to lift up, encourage and towards which I want to offer strategies and theological reflections as we approach not only the official kick-off of the election season, but also as we anticipate gathering with family and friends around the holidays of Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years.

In short, I want us to explore, think about and pray for what it looks like when we hold our commitment to Christ above ALL OTHER IDENTITIES.

So, before we go any further, please allow me to say what I DO NOT mean by being a Purple Church or a Purple Christian.

I realize that to say that we are purple might lead some to believe that we just need to compromise or meet in the middle. That is not what I mean by Purple Church. To be a Purple Christian does not mean that we cannot hold passionately to what we believe is truth. Nor does it mean that we cannot disagree. To be a purple Christian DOES NOT mean that we simply meet in the middle and compromise what we believe to be true to be polite. “Bless your heart.” Besides, purple is the color of Advent, and that is where we are headed! Let’s be Advent purple!

Also, by Purple, I do not mean that to be a Christian means that we do not see, know, experience or name evil as it exists in the world and in others. To be a purple Christian does not mean that we have to believe that there is really no such thing as evil or that we/others are not culpable or responsible for evil actions. All that is wrong with the world is NOT the result of misguided but well-intentioned people. There is real evil in the world, how are we to deal with that as purple Christians and as a purple church?

So, what DOES it mean to be a Purple Church? What is a Purple Church and why would we want to be one?

For me, the basic Scriptural call to be a purple church is the New Commandment that Jesus gave first to his disciples in John's Gospel on the eve of his own arrest, crucifixion and death and that is given to us again today. It really matters how we understand God's nature and purpose in the world. And what Jesus – and the rest of Scripture – tells us is that God's purpose in the world and God's nature is always and forever the purpose and nature of love. And, those who claim Christ are commanded to "love one another" just as we have been loved by God in Christ. We can only call ourselves followers of Jesus IF we "have love for one another."

Jesus gave this commandment to his followers immediately following the departure of Judas Iscariot to go and betray him, and just before his own arrest, torture, crucifixion and death. Remember, Jesus was crucified by those who believed that he needed to die to defend God. The religious leadership thought it was their religious duty to kill Jesus – to serve God. Jesus was killed in the name of God – the very God who sent him. Jesus' command is not a command to feel some sentimental, warm, fuzzy love. This commandment is given to us in the face of evil, betrayal, death and the sort of religious ideology that is willing to kill others to preserve its own truth, power and control. Love God above all else, and that love is what allows us to love all others made in God's image – i.e. every human being – even when they come to kill us.

And, at first, Peter seems to get it. "I will lay down my life for you!" says Simon Peter. Simon Peter loves Christ more than life itself, and is willing to die rather than desert. And Jesus, knowing Peter and knowing us, reminds him and us that our ability to love God more than all else is easier to claim than it is to live. "Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows (before the next sunrise) you will have denied me three times." It is true of Simon Peter, and it is true of us.

And that brings me to the parable that Jesus tells us in Matthew's Gospel. I would ask that you mark this parable in your own Bibles and consider reading it every day over the next week or so. Ask God to show you what you need to see in your own heart and life when this parable shines into our own daily lives. Jesus tells this parable about the Kingdom of heaven as a parable of judgment. Later in Chapter 13, Jesus explains the parable in light of the end of time and the judgment that will usher in the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven. In that interpretation, we are cautioned to remember that in this life and in this world, evil and good are so closely grown together that we cannot root out the evil without also uprooting the good. Politically speaking this reminds us that there is no human solution to any problem that is so perfect that it does not also have evil consequences. In this life, evil and good travel so joined at the hip that – for example - every social service attempt at compassion also breeds contempt or corruption.

I find this parable always challenges my own views and opinions. There is no unadulterated good and no complete truth in us. All that we do that is good is also infected with self-interest. There is no truth in protesting that what I do is all good, all true, all right. In my ability to do good there is always the evil of pride and self-assurance. In my ability to know and to speak truth there is always the limitation of my own experience, my own ignorance, my own pride and my own tendency to serve ME and my own interests. Jesus' parable reminds us that God alone can separate good from evil in us and in the world, and we ought not to harbor any

illusions that we are somehow ourselves or as churches not tainted by sin and susceptible to evil – even when we mean to do good.

In his theological treatise, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Reinhold Niebuhr addresses the sin of pride. And in that amazing treatment (written in 1941), Niebuhr writes about human intellectual pride, “All human knowledge is tainted with an ‘ideological’ taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge. . . . The philosopher who imagines himself capable of stating a final truth merely because he has sufficient perspective upon past history to be able to detect previous philosophical errors is clearly the victim of the ignorance of his ignorance. . . . Each great thinker makes the same mistake, in turn, of imagining himself the final thinker.”ⁱ Niebuhr argues that our own ignorance of our ignorance is always paired with self-interest. We judge ourselves by our own standards and find ourselves to be “good.” Then, we judge others by the same standard and find them lacking and evil. “When the self mistakes its standards for God’s standards it is naturally inclined to attribute the very essence of evil to non-conformists.”ⁱⁱ Put another way, as we sit in our armchairs at home surrounded by snacks and with a bird’s eye view of the entire football field, we believe ourselves to be the coach’s equal and so we call out plays that – if only the quarterback would execute – the team would certainly win!

In the next few weeks, I hope to challenge us all to think about what our church community would look like if we held our common faith in Christ and our trust in the providence of God higher than we hold our political and theological convictions. And what could our own lives of faith look like in a polarized world if we did that same on a day to day basis? We will disagree – no doubt about it. How can we do that with the clear humble knowledge that our own opinions are partial and that even in our wisest pronouncements we are only partly good and true? How can we hold our own convictions, but hold them subject to the command that Christ gave us to love?

When I say that I hope FLPC will continue and grow in our ability to be a Purple Church, I mean not that we will be a place where Republicans just tolerate and exist parallel to Democrats – or vice versa – but a place where we are not red or blue, but we are something altogether different – a community of love, the body of Christ, humble in what we do not yet know and loving enough to withstand even hate from those who disagree with us. I covet your prayers in this pursuit of who and what God wants us to be.

ⁱ Niebuhr, Reinhold, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Part I; Chapter 7, pp. 194-195

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 199