

September 29, 2019
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Purple Family, Friends and Church

Matthew 18:15-22
Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

Introduction: Last week I began a four-week sermon series on the theme of what it means to be a Purple Church. Next week we will celebrate World Communion, but I will return to this theme for the two weeks following that universal Christian celebration of Communion. Last week I defined a purple church as a faith community where we hold our commitment to God in Christ above all other identities. And, I'd like to try to sketch out an approach and strategies for us as disciples of Jesus Christ as we approach both Thanksgiving and the official kick-off of the US Election Season. To be purple means that whether we are Republican or Democrat or Independent, we hold our commitment to Christ above our political ideologies. To be "purple" is to hold our identity as disciples of Christ above every other identity. To be "purple" is not simply to exist in parallel with those who disagree with us, or simply to remain quiet, or to compromise, or to pretend that there is not evil or deceit in the world. But to be purple is to be something completely different. It is my belief that if the Christian Church could model for the nation what it looks like to live together in love and respect with those with whom we disagree, we could be a light in the darkness. So, I'd like to continue this theme today by talking about a way to be Purple Christians on an interpersonal level – with our family, friends and church family. Let's begin with Scripture.

As we consider what it means to be purple Christians in a divided, polarized world, we must begin with Jesus' command to us in John's Gospel: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35). And today we consider how to live out that command with the people we spend the most time with – our family, our friends and our Church family. On one level, we already do this well. There are a lot of you who cancel each other's votes out at the ballot box every time there is an election. Many of you are married to or are the child of that person whose vote cancels yours out. So, we are – on one level – already experts at living with and loving those with whom we disagree. You likely would not be here this morning if you weren't already pretty good at this. There are plenty of other churches that you could attend that do not tolerate a wide variety of opinions or political positions, but who find comfort and security in a narrow range of opinions. But that is not so here. I hope and trust that this is not new news to you!

But on another level, we need to talk about how we live together as purple Christians with the people we know and love most, because this is really the proving ground or the incubator for spiritual growth and maturity. 1 John 4: 20-21 says, “those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” It is very easy to say that we “just love people!” As long as “people” are in the abstract, we “love people.” But an individual person is stinky, aggravating and inconvenient. So, until we can love an individual person, we know next to nothing about “loving people” and until we can love people, we cannot love God.

The challenge of loving others is not a new challenge. Jesus gives us a literal conflict resolution model in Matthew that both calls us to a higher standard of love and community AND recognizes our limitations as human beings. Because we are human, we routinely hurt, offend and misuse each other. We sin against each other. We do not treat each other as God’s beloved children, and we hurt and wound each other, even when we don’t intend to do so. Purple Christians acknowledge that we are limited, partial, self-serving, afraid and ignorant of our own ignorance.¹ Because that is who we are, sometimes relationships must end. We cannot always maintain faithful and loving community. But purple Christians know that, when a relationship ends, our own brokenness always plays a part. Purple Christians claim our own brokenness as an opportunity to ask God to forgive us, heal us and teach us what we need to know about ourselves that contributed to that break. Never waste a good grief, conflict, fight or divorce by neglecting to learn all that you can about yourselves and God through suffering. Often what we learn in a time of fracture we are unwilling to learn any other way. So, purple Christians do not respond to a relationship fracture by telling everyone who will listen how horrible, evil and wicked the other person is while claiming their own innocence and faithfulness.

The second thing that Scripture leads me to say is that Christians should fracture or divide up or separate **ONLY OVER THINGS THAT ARE ESSENTIAL**. I’d love to talk more about this, but suffice it to say that Christians and Churches routinely divide up and split over things like the color of the carpet, the worship style or who controls the money. Rarely do Churches split up over disagreements about the belief that God is holy, sovereign, loving or just. Our own Book of Order says that “a congregation shall welcome all persons who trust in God’s grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the fellowship and ministry of his Church (F-1.0403). No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to profession of faith. The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel.” (G-1.0302) I think that when Jesus comes again and we all line up for the Kingdom, we are all going to be mightily surprised who is in line ahead of us and behind us.

Third, Paul’s instruction to the church in Rome (and to us) reminds us that Christian Community is not built or kept through force of our own will. Real, authentic Christian community is **ONLY** built by the force of LOVE. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection.” The problem is that we are not able to MAKE

ourselves love another. Love is not accomplished by force of will. We can choose to act in ways that are loving, but we cannot force ourselves to love. Love is a gift that God gives to all that ask, but we must be willing to ask AND willing to receive love. And to be able to receive love, one must be willing to let go of hate, resentment and fear. That is much harder. So, how are we to get to the point where we can actually love those with whom we vehemently disagree and perhaps don't even like?

Roman Catholic monk and Father, Thomas Merton, wrote that the "beginning of the fight against hatred, the basic Christian answer to hatred, is not the commandment to love, but what must necessarily come before in order to make the commandment bearable and comprehensible. It is a prior commandment, *to believe*. The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but *the faith that one is loved*. The faith that one is loved *by* God. That faith that one is loved by God although unworthy – or, rather, irrespective of one's worth. . . . is a true liberation of the spirit."ⁱⁱ

Friends, I really think that Merton's insight is needed now more than ever. Only when I really believe and claim God's love for myself, am I able to love others. It is only the love of God, in me, that allows my relationship with others to shift so that I may begin to love them – even when I don't like them – because God loves them – just as God loves me. I am not able to love others, until I truly and deeply believe that God loves me.

This, friends in Christ, is I believe the one thing that most keeps us from following Jesus or being changed into those who can love. We have not come to a deep belief in God's love for us, nor are we in touch with this love on a daily basis. So, without the assurance of God's love, we come to believe that faith is about a moral checklist or a social or political agenda, or about getting "them" (whoever THEM is) to change so that THEY are more like us.

In order to be purple Christians we must FIRST seek, pray and ask God for a deep knowledge and certainty of God's love for us, so that we may be changed. Then and only then can our own ego, our own self-serving, limited view be gotten around (even in part) so that we may be able to love people – especially those with whom we disagree.

So, the good news and the bad news is this: In a divided and polarized world it is possible for us to love as God has loved us and to be a force for life, love, reconciliation and truth ONLY WHEN WE BEGIN WITH OURSELVES. So, I want to end with a few practical strategies to help us when we bump up against each other and struggle to live in love with our family, friends and Church family.

First, we begin by praying and asking God for the gift to believe and to live in the assurance that we are loved – beyond measure and beyond worthiness. If that is a struggle, I'd be happy to talk more about this with you. You might begin by taping this card to your bathroom mirror and reading it every day. On it are the catechism questions that we have often used in worship here. I'll put cards on the communion table for you to take home. They say:

Who are you? I am a child of God.

What does it mean to be a child of God? That I belong to God who loves me.ⁱⁱⁱ

Second, pray that the person you are having difficulty with will also know – beyond doubt – God’s love and blessing. For, if they know God’s love, then there is the possibility of resolving your differences and living as Christ commands.

Third, realize that because we are limited creatures, we cannot resolve every broken or contentious relationship. But we can determine to invest time in a few that are important to us. Jesus’ practical steps to reconciliation, in light of human limitation, are helpful here. So, let’s just say that theoretically someone at the Thanksgiving table begins to “firehose” you – you know what I mean – they launch into a tirade or a partisan torrent that you disagree with – I want to suggest that INSTEAD of fire hosing them right back – you can

- A. Stop and pray that love and not your own ego will do the driving – that love, not pride, will drive the conversation from your side.
- B. Then, I can think of three options that are Gospel inspired and very counter-cultural.
 1. Calmly invite them to remember that you disagree with them and ask for a cease fire at the table instead of choosing to firehose them right back and deepen the divide.
 2. Or remind them that there is a real discussion, with multiple sides, to be had on this issue, but that around the Thanksgiving table is probably not the best time to have that discussion. Then, decide IF you want to invest time in that relationship, and if you do, offer another venue and time to talk and listen.
 3. Try to listen and to restate their position in a way that they can agree with it. This is tough, but offers real potential for growth in relationship. In most of what passes for political debate in this country, each side takes time restating the other team’s position in such an overblown and ridiculous way that it is clear that the goal is winning and never reconciliation. But we are called to reconciliation and to discern truth. You know what I mean. The Democratic version is something like, “All Republicans want immigrant children taken from their families and euthanized.” The Republican version is something like, “All Democrats support an alien invasion on our southern border!” This week, when you see those headlines, join me in calling foul. This unfair fighting technique is employed by all ideological divides – not just political camps.
- C. Finally, after the exchange is over and you are sitting quietly. Notice if you are stewing and replaying the exchange in your head over and over with your imagined retorts getting more and more pointed and hostile. If so, pray to God that you will be able to put this relationship and this exchange into God’s hands for two reasons. First, so that God can teach us what we need to learn about our own limits and ignorance. And Second, so that we can ask God to help BOTH OF us receive God’s love.

I have good news and bad news. The good news is that it is possible to be a purple Christian with our families, friends and Church family. The bad news is that it has to begin with us being transformed – head, heard and hands – into those who have received and who then give God’s love to everyone we meet.

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

ⁱⁱ New Seeds of Contemplation By Thomas Merton; c. 1961; The Abbey of Gethsemani, Inc.: pp. 74-75

ⁱⁱⁱ Belonging to God: A First Catechism; PC(USA) Question 1 & 2.