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Purple Citizens

Psalm 146

Ephesians 2:11-22

Intro: This is the third in a four Sunday Sermon Series on being a Purple Church and Purple Christians. I claim an identity for each of us and for our church community that holds our identity as followers of Jesus Christ above all other identities. We are not primarily Democrat or Republican here. We are primarily something entirely different. The term Purple Church has been used to mean a people who are neither red, nor blue, but purple. I'd like to hold out for an understanding that by Purple we do not just mean a mix of red and blue/Republican and Democrat – but instead we mean a different kind of people. Like Purple is the color of Advent – the season when we prepare and wait for the birth of Christ – just so are we called to be purple people – those who are waiting and preparing for Christ to come. And today I hope to help us think about what it means to be Purple Christians in our nation – Purple citizens of our nation.

Years ago, when I was teaching an eighth grade Sunday school class, we had been talking about how Christians make decisions. And, I had made the case (quite convincingly I thought) for The Rule of Love as our guide to decision making. We talked about how Jesus taught us that the two greatest commandments are (1) Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and (2) love your neighbor as yourself. Mk 12:29-31

So, I argued, when it comes to making decisions, Christians are to consider whether or not a particular decision helps us love God, self and neighbor – or not. So, to help the eighth graders apply the Rule of Love in their own decision making, I created hypothetical situations or case studies.

One case study went this way. Suppose that a new movie comes out this weekend. It is rated R for violence, and it is the talk of the town. You have heard that the violence is really graphic and you heard your parents talking about the movie and deciding that they were not going to go. But some friends, who have invited you to spend the night at their house, want to go see the movie. Even though you are only in 8th grade and not old enough to get into an R-rated movie, they know a friend who works at one of the local cinemas who will let you in. “No problem!” they say! You know that your parents would not be happy, but you will be spending the night with your friends, and his parents won't ask questions. So, do you go? Does going to see this movie help you love God, self and neighbor, or not?

So, almost without fail, every year, when we got to this dilemma, the eighth graders would say, “We would go to the movie. It doesn’t help us love God, love self or love neighbor, and it requires us to lie to our parents and break the law to get into the movie. But we would still go.” And, I would normally say. Thank you for being honest. But I want you to understand that if the Rule of Love represents how we are to make decisions as followers of Jesus it won’t be the last time that you make a decision that is at odds with what you say you believe. Adults do it all the time. But, at the very least have the integrity to say that you are making a decision to do what you want to do that is in contradiction to what you say you believe. And at some point, everyone has to decide for themselves what they really believe and what their guiding principles are for making decisions.

Each one of us has to decide if we believe that there is an eternal, unchanging God who made us and to whom we belong. And if we believe that, then we decide if we will live in relationship to that God or not. And if we decide to live in relationship to God, then Scripture is clear that love – of God, self and neighbor – is how we are to live. So, make no mistake, I believe that the Rule of Love is what guides Christians in their everyday lives. If we don’t want to be guided by the Rule of Love we are free to live that way. Let’s just please don’t claim to be Christian.

The Psalm we read is clear about what is real, true and eternal. Human beings, even the most powerful among us, are temporary. All of us will die. And when we die, our plans die with us. God alone is eternal. God made all that is, and God’s plan is for justice, freedom, compassion, hospitality and generosity. And all that gets in the way of that plan will be thwarted and ruined. God alone rules forever, says the Psalmist.

When it comes to the topic of living as followers of Jesus in an age that is marked by division, rapid change, division and vitriolic politics, the time has come for us to decide if we really believe that God is eternal and if God will really work to bring God’s plan to completion. If we believe in God, and we identify as Christian, then the time has come to acknowledge that primary identity and to decide if we will live according to God’s will or not.

Do we believe that this Christ centered reality and Christian life is the ultimate value OR is what guides our decisions and values our own best interest, our own security, comfort wealth and power? Which of those realities is eternal, and by what values will we all be judged?

Do we believe that we are first Citizens of God’s Kingdom, OR do we hold some other identity as primary and our identity as followers of Jesus as secondary?

Our identity as Citizens of God’s Kingdom is either what guides and directs our personal and civic actions, OR it is time to be honest with ourselves and others and say that we pretend to be disciples of Jesus when it suits us, but we really worship something else. Purple Citizens hold their citizenship in God’s Kingdom above all other identifiers and all other kingdoms. Purple citizens consciously work to make sure that it is this citizenship in God’s Kingdom that governs all of the other interests, commitments and passions. And Jesus says that the primary marker of those who claim their citizenship in God’s Kingdom is that they love – God, self and others.

The early Christian Church to whom Paul wrote in Ephesians was a deeply divided and partisan group. There were the Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was indeed the Messiah and so had become Christ followers. And then there were the Gentiles, the pagans, who had also left a life of either no god or multiple gods to become Christ followers. Between the two groups there was mostly hostility and partisanship. Each group protested the abuses of the other and proclaimed loudly that they were right and God loved them more. The Jewish Christians said that since Jesus had been a Jew, one needed first to become a Jew in order to become a follower of Jesus. And the Gentile Christians said that no such conversion was necessary, that in Jesus, God offered directly the love, mercy and grace of God – without regard to circumcision or obedience to the law. Let's just say that our age is not the first to have sides pitted against each other, each side claiming God's love while yelling at each other about how their side is more right.

What Paul says is that once we claim Christ, we MUST let go of all other identities and everything that separates us from other believers. Ephesians says that Christ is our peace. The walls that divide us are broken down and because we all claim Christ as Lord, we are reconciled in his one body. So, we are no longer strangers to each other, but we are citizens of the same kingdom and members of the same household – a kingdom and a household made for the purpose of allowing God to live among us.

All claims of worthiness or of being more correct than another Christian are, at best, irrelevant or, at worst, deluded, in light of the mercy and grace that God pours on all of us imperfect and partial human beings. It is the Grace and Love of God that changes us into one body. To claim Christ while also holding on to our own delusion of being right or worthy is instead to reject God's Love, Mercy and Grace. Nothing separates those who love God and accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are all citizens of God's Kingdom because God has made it so. Our differences are inconsequential – because God's love and reconciliation define us – not our political camp, denomination, race, sex or nationality.

And because we identify as citizens of God's Kingdom, we live according to the law of the Kingdom – Love. And we live by the Law of God's Kingdom in our private, personal lives as well as in our public and political lives. When I say political, I mean that by virtue of being human we are all political – how we act in the world affects the balance of power and the distribution of goods. We are – by virtue of being human - political beings. Our faith is BOTH personal and public/political. Purple Citizens understand that we live our personal and political lives according to the rules of the Kingdom of God, or we are actually citizens of the kingdoms of this world.

So, as Purple Citizens, we are required to live, to vote and to work according to the values of the Kingdom in which we are citizens. And the values of the Kingdom of God are – according to Scripture – values like reconciliation, peace, compassion, generosity, justice and freedom. I challenge you to find in Scripture commands to lie, to steal, to hoard more than we need while others starve, to use our power for our own privilege or to fail to protect those who cannot

protect themselves. How we live with our families and closest friends is to be guided by the Rule of Love. And our votes and political activism must also be guided by the Rule of Love. If not, then we should at least have the courage to say that we are citizens of a kingdom other than the one ruled and judged by the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

Those who say that they love God, are to reflect the nature of God. And all of us who say that we follow Jesus, must begin the process of being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ. Purple Citizens are those who live in their nation, whatever that nation happens to be, according to the rules of God's Kingdom.

Purple Citizens are those who have received and claimed the love, mercy and grace of God and who have been changed by that gift into people who stop yelling that they are "more right" and who stop trying to climb to the top of the power pile, and who instead get busy addressing the suffering, pain and injustice in the world around them. And we do that – not because the poor, blind, strangers and prisoners are worthy or good enough. Purple Citizens do that because we first came to know that God loves and chooses even us, who have never been worthy enough to warrant God's love in Christ.

You've heard the old joke about the three men who met each week for breakfast and Bible Study? One morning, one of the men admitted that his conscience had been troubled about something. He told the others that he had realized that his habit of speeding and trying to get through yellow lights might be reflecting badly on his faith and his church, because he had a church sticker on the back of his car. He realized he was breaking the law, and he knew that something needed to change, so he asked his friends to pray for guidance. The next week, they asked the speeder if his prayers for guidance had been answered, to which the speeder replied, "Yes! I removed the church sticker from the back window of my car."

If we don't want to be Purple Citizens let's at least be honest.

If we are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, then we have some personal changes to make and a lot of work to do.