



In our group discussion, we studied three suggested options given in response to the question: What should be the Church's role in a divided society? Option One suggested that the Church should be a refuge, a place where people don't have to hear about the sociopolitical sphere at all, sticking only to the explicitly theological. Option Two suggested that the Church should be playing an intermediary role, facilitating discussions and getting people together for dialogue. Option Three suggested that the Church should be aggressively prophetic from the pulpit, tackling social issues of the day, head-on.

We had a fantastic discussion and talked for about two hours before calling it a night. I can assure you there were some strong feeling about each of these options. What was our decision? Which option did we choose as the one we want to see the Church espouse, moving forward?

Well... none of them, really. That's not how this works. We don't "vote" at the end of the dialogue to ask what road to take. We simply discuss each option. So at the end of the night, what did we accomplish?

We talked. That's it. We got a bunch of people in a room together, who had a variety of different sociopolitical leanings, and they talked to each other for a couple of hours. Seems anticlimactic, doesn't it? Wasn't that a big fat waste of time?

No, not really. Because the only goal, was to get people talking. The goal, was to hear other voices – voices of people we know and trust, people with whom we've worshiped, eaten together at potlucks, sung side by side on Christmas Eve by candlelight. We heard those voices sharing opinions and ideas that we may have honestly never heard before, because sometimes we may be a bit too blinded by our own partisan biases to listen, when we hear those ideas in the public arena – but we take it a little more seriously, when we hear it from our neighbor in the next pew, someone we know.

The goal, was to HEAR EACH OTHER.

And at the end of an evening of hearing each other, my instructions called for us to summarize what common themes and values we all shared, that came out in the course of our conversation. For our group, those were the following:

People on all sides want to be heard

The Church plays a role in society, whether it wants to, or not

The Church desires that no one should feel marginalized outside our community

We desire for all members to be understood and included inside our community



The Church is a source of education for the broader society
THE WORDS OF THE CHURCH, MATTER.

Now that last one is interesting... the words of the Church, matter. What does that mean, exactly?

It's easy to that is referring specifically to the voice of Pastor Scott here at CLC, or that it is referring to Bishop Kusserow, or Bishop Eaton. Alternatively, one could think that it's referring to Bishop David Zubik from the Pittsburgh Catholic diocese, Pope Francis, Franklin Graham, Joel Osteen, or whatever other high profile preachers you can think of.

I don't think any of that is correct. At least, it's not fully correct. Yes, those people all speak for the Christian Church in some capacity. But I don't think that's all our group was trying to say, when they agreed that the words of the Church matter. I think they were going further than that. Whose words, then, were they talking about?

They were talking about YOUR VOICE.

The Church is YOU. And the Church is ME. We are Church. We are Church Together. And we are Church, in the World. That means that when we leave this place, and we go out into the world, the things we say, matter. Words, are tremendously powerful. Words can stir up a nation to good, or to evil. Words must be used carefully. Ever the more, in this incredibly toxic and negative modern environment.

Unfortunately, when the environment is this relentlessly toxic, we begin throwing our words around more carelessly, because our tempers are going up, our patience levels are low, and what's more – our own self-esteem is running low, as well. The human race is seeing anxiety and depression on a mass scale, right now, that matches anything else we've seen for decades. When people begin devaluing themselves in their own minds, they start believing that their own words don't matter anymore. I can say hateful things about my neighbor who supports that candidate or that platform because no one's listening to little old me anyway. I'm just one little person. My words don't matter to anyone.

But if you believe that, friends, then you are denying our scriptures for today, which I've managed to go halfway through this sermon without explicitly referencing, yet.

Our reading from John's first epistle today reminds us of our status as Children of God. That's a phrase we throw around so much here in Church that it's quite easy to take it for granted. We hear it all the time. It's easy to forget how radical and transformational a thing it is, that the



God of the Universe should call us children. Not servants, not followers, not citizens, but CHILDREN.

Now ponder this for a moment: the offspring of a thing, behave like that thing, don't they? Now that doesn't mean I'm saying you'll behave exactly like your human parents... I'm simply pointing out that if you're a baby elephant, you have a trunk, right? If you're a baby giraffe, you have a long neck, right?

So what does that mean for us if we're Children of God??

It means that YOU MATTER. YOUR WORDS AND ACTIONS MATTER. FOR NO OTHER REASON AT ALL, THAN BECAUSE GOD DECLARES IT SO. And to argue otherwise, is to argue DIRECTLY with scripture. We are all, as our Lutheran heritage proudly declares, simultaneously saint and sinner. All our lives. From the moment we're born till the moment we die, we are simultaneously saint and sinner. And the "saint" part of that, is because God said so.

In our Gospel today we have one of the most beloved passages in all of scripture and certainly my favorite sayings of Jesus, in the Beatitudes. It's worth pointing out the tense of the verbs that Jesus uses... blessed ARE the poor in Spirit... blessed ARE the meek... blessed ARE those who hunger. The tense here, is present, and the verbs are indicative. It is not past tense, suggesting we WERE blessed at the beginning of Creation, but not anymore. It is not future tense, suggesting we WILL be blessed at the end of the world, but not yet. And these verbs are not imperative, commanding us to START regarding ourselves as blessed. They are simply indicative, which means Jesus is pointing out a reality that already IS. We ARE the blessed, here, now, at this moment.

"Well Steve, in my life of COVID lockdown and with all the toxicity surrounding the election, I sure don't feel very blessed, I can tell you that."

I get it. There have been quite a few days lately in my life where I haven't felt very blessed either, as I referenced at the beginning of this sermon.

But we are. To say otherwise is to tell Jesus he must be wrong. Jesus didn't say life was going to be all rainbows and sunshine. What he does do, is proclaim to us the liberating and empowering message that we are blessed despite our lousy circumstances. That no matter what brokenness we are living through, it hasn't negated our status as Children of God.

This is where I think our celebration of All Saints' Day, and my school project, can converge. What they share in common is the fundamental value of the Human Being, as a Child of God. As simultaneously saint and sinner. As one created in God's image, for whom Christ died,



signed and sealed in baptism for eternal life. And this value of the Human Being continues after death, as we remember today the value of all those who've gone before us in the faith. Their value was so great that we continue to remember the impact they had on our lives. Their words mattered, enough that we remember them beyond the grave.

And if we matter, if we have that value, then we are called upon to use it responsibly. We are charged to live our lives as the Children of God we were called to be. Jesus reminds us today that one of the responsibilities that comes with that, is the divine charge to be PEACEMAKERS.

That's not an easy thing to do, friends. It's not easy to do when everyone in our COVID world (myself included) is sad and grouchy all the time. It's not easy when the election season fills us with such never ending pessimism.

But Jesus didn't promise it would be easy. He only promised that we are blessed, as we do it. And if we have God's blessing on our side, we can do it, no matter how hard it may seem. We can be the Peacemakers in our communities, that God needs us to be in this dark, dark world.

And I'd say THAT, is The Church's Role in a Divided Society. Amen.