

“Tell them who they are”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
October 24, 2021

*Jeremiah 22:1-5, 13-17 and 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 3:3-9*

An Outline by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

- I. The year is 1968. MLK Jr. has just been assassinated. A third grade teacher in Iowa decides to do a social experiment.
  - a. This is when you could still do stuff like this. Produced fascinating studies, but probably also a lot of traumatized kids.
  - b. She divided her class by eye color—blue eyes and brown eyes. On the first day, she told the class that the blue-eyed children were smarter, nicer, neater, and better. They were praised and got to go first in the lunch line and take a longer recess. Meanwhile, she ridiculed and criticized the brown-eyed children. The next day, she did this in reverse.
  - c. The results were astonishing. Those who were labeled inferior acted inferior; they did poorly on tests and schoolwork (even if just the day before they had done well). They believed their teacher when she told them they were stupid. Meanwhile, the students labeled superior—students who had, just a day earlier, been sweet and kind—became mean and pushed around the other kids.
  - d. The teacher says, “I watched what had been marvelous, cooperative, wonderful, thoughtful children turn into nasty, vicious, discriminating little third-graders in a space of fifteen minutes.”
  - e. They forgot who they were. They forgot they were friends. They forgot they were classmates. They forgot they actually were smart or kind. They thought of themselves only as blue eyes or brown eyes, superior or inferior.
  - f. Bad things happen when we forget who we are.
  
- II. This summer, when I asked for your biggest questions, one of you wrote to me, asking, “How, as Christians, do we stand up for democracy? Does God have this political challenge under control, without our participation?” It’s a question Christians have struggled with since the beginning. We all understand we are supposed to worship God, but what do we do with that faith once we walk out those doors and engage the real world, especially one that seems so opposed to the values of the gospel? Do we trust that God will take care of it, or do we have a responsibility to take action?
  - a. This is a hard question, because however we answer, this can go really badly. We’ve seen people so wed their faith and politics that they’ve lost sight of the differences. We’ve seen others so separate the two that their faith is without works (and thus dead, according to James in the Bible).

- b. We feel afraid; if we engage, we could lose friends, lose opportunities; we could also get it wrong. We don't want to be like those people who think they have all the answers and condemn everyone else. We don't want to deal with those people either. We're also wondering: what's the point? Why bother? Is anything we say or do really going to change anyone's mind?

### III. Jeremiah

- a. Jeremiah had to wonder that too. It was a lonely thing being a prophet.
- b. The community is broken. God says: I have a vision of the community I am growing; I need you to be its witness.
- c. In Jeremiah and among all the prophets, we see God calling people of faith to engage the community and its political leaders for the sake of creating a society that better resembles the will or values of God: justice, righteousness, protecting the most vulnerable (the immigrant, the orphan, the widow, the poor).

### IV. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians

- a. A diverse church. Pagan day laborers: poor. Jewish people. Wealthy intellectuals.
- b. A divided, partisan community: Some say, "I belong to Paul" (the Gentile party, turning liberty into license), others say, "I belong to Apollos" (the intellectuals; Acts tells us that Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, eloquent and well educated) or "I belong to Cephas" (Peter, Jews who taught that the Jewish law must still be observed, legalists) or "I belong to Christ" (thought they were the only true Christians; they thought Christ belonged to them; intolerant and self-righteous)
- c. Immoralities, hatreds, and inequities are threatening the fabric of the community. Some people are saying they're better than others. Some eating lavishly while others go hungry. People are mocking others.
- d. Paul says that he's scared to speak up too. He says in chapter two that he came to them "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (2:3). It wasn't easy. He wasn't the best speaker, or the smartest.

### V. Remind them of who they are

- a. Jeremiah reminds them of what it means to be the people of God (the once-vulnerable who protect the vulnerable) and reminds the leader of what it means to be a king (justice and righteousness, not wealth and power).
- b. Paul reminds them that they are siblings. He calls them brothers and sisters. They are members of the one family of Christ. He says, "Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" There was only one name in which they were baptized: Jesus. In chapter three, he goes on to say, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? You belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (3:16, 23).

- c. Both Jeremiah and Paul are saying: remember who and whose you are. You are a child of God. You are a follower of Christ. Act like it: truth, love, justice, righteousness.
- d. Our calling, in this broken democracy, is to remind people of who they are.
- e. Remind yourself of who you are. Remind yourself of who they are. Remind them of who you are. Remind them of who they are.
- f. The point isn't to get everyone to agree. It's to get people relating to each other differently. That is what faith seeks for our democracy. That each person can honor the image of God in the other and engage each other accordingly.
- g. Every time someone yells, degrades, divides, hates, mocks, bullies, condescends, perpetrates injustice, refuses to listen, refuses to speak, sees evil and does nothing—every time this democracy breaks—you remind them of who they are, and who we are: children of God.
- h. Story of dialogue program that takes people who differ on difficult topics like abortion; they are not allowed to declare their position until the end; instead they tell their stories and share the experiences that shaped their beliefs, while others listen. They listen to each other's stories, and their heartbreak, and a bond forms. They don't necessarily change their viewpoint, but they change their image of the other, because they now realize they share the same grief.<sup>1</sup>

VI. We will not always succeed. Many will not listen. Many will not dialogue.

- a. If you can't even agree on that, if the person refuses to acknowledge their or your humanity, if they can't even accept that love is the guide and goal, then stop there. You will make no progress with them.
- b. If they won't accept who you are, or who they are, or if you can't, there's no going forward until that gets resolved.
- c. Wipe the dust from your feet and move on.

VII. What we can do is model the alternative, as individuals and as the church. We can be living witnesses to our shared identity as children of God.

- a. We know that the church has failed in this regard tremendously. But there is still hope.
- b. For here is the church. Here is democracy as it should be. We are white and Black and Latino, old and young, gay and straight, trans and cis, poor and rich. We are liberals and we are conservatives. We are people of all kinds of abilities and disabilities. We have different beliefs and ideas. We disagree on a lot of things. And yet, we are one community because we remember who we are: we are children of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer, "Healing the Heart of Democracy"

- c. We have a shared identity and a shared purpose.
- d. “See how they love each other.”
- e. What a mighty calling... to take that out into the world. That love. That memory. To tell the world: we are not the monsters we pretend to be. All this hate, it’s a lie. Like that classroom experiment of blue and brown eyes. We are called to reveal the lie. To pull back the curtain. To tell them who they are. They—we—are the children of God, loved and loving.