

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

April 28, 2024, The Fifth Sunday in Easter

Psalm 22:25-31 (The Message Translation), I John 4:7-21

LOVE AND HATE AND LOVE

As some of you know I spent an internship year as a student pastor in a Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland outside of Belfast. I lived in a safe, quiet seaside village of Groomsport and was the assistant pastor of a 1300-member church. I was there from September 1987 to September 1988, and if you know anything about Northern Ireland's history, I was living there in the midst of what they called "The Troubles," which is a much too kind name for so much pain and violence. The Troubles are not easily defined, although they appeared to divide along Catholic and Protestant religious lines, they also had a lot to do with a very long history, and entrenched politics, and the land ownership that had nothing to do with religious affiliation. In fact, during the year I lived there, people told me they would explain "The Troubles" to me, and each person told me a different thing. Much like the Middle East today it is not an easy history to untangle. But the hatred runs so deep.

For someone who grew up in the suburbs of Portland, OR it meant I suddenly lived in a world something like a war zone, of armed soldiers on the streets of Belfast, and sometimes in our village, military checkpoints, machine guns pointed at me if I was in traffic behind military vehicles, and driving into IRA territory every time I visited church members at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. I lived in a land where paramilitary groups enacted horrors on each other and sometimes on their own members—often daily, and where I learned a lot about the interconnectedness of international terrorism.

One of the many lasting images I carry from that year is the bravery and tenacity of people to create ordinary life for themselves and their families while living in the midst of a war zone.

Another was what it was like to live with generations-long entrenched civil war between neighbors. Within a couple weeks of moving into the mainly Protestant village I lived in people had pointed out to me where the Catholics lived.

By 5th Grade, and sometimes earlier, students were divided into Catholic and Protestant schools. They all wore school uniforms and when they passed each other on the streets all they had to do was look at each other's uniforms to know their religion.

If they opened a newspaper and looked at the pictures from weddings all they had to do was look at the groom's ties to know if the groom was Catholic or Protestant by whether he was wearing a bow tie or a long tie.

In the 60's in Belfast and Londonderry which is what you would call the town if you were Protestant, or Derry if you were Catholic, 18 to 20 foot "Peace Walls," that still stand, were built to divide neighborhoods Catholic from Protestant, so that generations of children grew up never even seeing each other until they were old enough to ride on public transportation or drive. But by then entrenched stereotypes were entrenched.

I'll never forget when the Congregation I served in did ecumenical evening Lenten services with the Church of England and Catholic Parish near us. Each week we were at a different church. Each week we had to walk through protesters, who handed out pamphlets saying we were condemning ourselves to hell by worshiping with Catholics. When our church hosted, one of the Elders in our church, a man in his 60's stood very close to me as we were setting out the biscuits, (the cookies), for the tea after worship. As people were walking in from the service, he was standing so close I could feel him trembling. "Walter," I asked, "Is something wrong?" "I've never been in a room with Catholics before," he answered. It had taken so much courage for him to just show up to

worship, and then stay to help serve the biscuits to people that all his life he had been told were his enemies and the enemies of his family, his religion and his land.

The reason I've been remembering my life in Northern Ireland is the upcoming 2024 presidential election in our country. Now don't brace yourself and think her Covid Brain has lost it and she is going to tell us how to vote, doesn't she know that's illegal. Yes, I know that's illegal and we could lose our text exempt status and that isn't what I'm going to talk about. So, you can start breathing again. I would never interfere with your individual voting choices ever. I think it is odious when pastors do that; it's so wrong.

Instead, because I lived in the devastating pain of Northern Ireland for a year, I've been thinking a lot about our dividing and entrenching into camps as a nation that we have experienced since the 2016 election and again in 2020. I've been remembering the stories many of you came to me with about friendships and family relationships that were shattered and broken during those election seasons. I remember some of you coming to me shocked by what was coming across your Facebook page and Twitter feeds, and the hard decisions to block people you loved on those sites, and sometimes in person.

As the election machine has been ramping up this year, I am convinced that we as followers of Jesus Christ

must be incredibly intentional about how we live our lives
and how we treat each other,
especially those who will not vote like we vote,
and those who do not think like we think.

It is mandatory that we as followers of Jesus choose **now** how we are going to be faithful to Jesus who has taught us how to love by loving us first.

This is one of those times where being people of faith gets so hard. About ten years ago there was a man, I'll call Ted, that used to stop by my office every month or so. I don't know how he found our church, but he'd come driving up in his battered white pick-up truck. And for about a year I had the privilege of being his pastor and I loved our week-day conversations because of his brutal honesty. He had had a hard-drinking, hard-living life, including some prison time. He did not mince words about who he had been. And then Jesus found him, and everything changed. He used to say to me, "Pastor, life was so much easier before Jesus, I just did whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and now life is hard work. It's hard to be a Believer and follower of Jesus!" Then we would both laugh and agree that it takes work to be faithful. Then he would say, "but this is what I am choosing, because Jesus is my life." I haven't seen him for years, but I miss our conversations because he was someone who knew that the life of faith takes work and we would talk about it together.

We who love Jesus live in a nation divided, we live in families and friendships divided, and I would guess that many of us have some pretty strong feelings about the coming election and some of its key players. And we are followers of Jesus Christ who calls us to love everyone, as he loves us.

Jesus is calling us to be lights of the world. He says we are like cities set on a hill that shine their lights for all to see. Or as my friend the Rev. Victor Abbey from Ghana says, "you may be the only Bible someone ever reads." And the author of I John calls to us with the words that challenge me in this election season and so I invite you to hear the challenge too.

We love because Jesus first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister 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 Jesus is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:20-21)

I feel such a deep conviction that we must decide **now** who we are going to be, and how we are going to act, and what we are going to say in public, and in private, as we walk into this coming election season exactly because we are God's children.

As the author of 1 John wrote: *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)*

The life of faith takes work. In this church family, in our own families, in our circle of friends, we live in communities of diversity and division.

How do we care for each other when we are divided?

How do we love like Jesus loves when our definitions of truth are so different, and yet we follow the same Jesus?

How do we love like Jesus loves when we both think the other is wrong and we aren't going to change each other's mind?

How do we love each other when we actually fear what the other believes?

I think of my dear friend the Rev. Rose Abbey, from Ghana who says hating another person is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die. It damages us over and over again.

Let me tell you that this is actually a sermon for me this morning and I am letting you listen in to a sermon that I need. I am scared by how divided our country is. I wrestle with how hard it is to be loving like Jesus loves, with how entrenched I am with my own deeply held convictions and what I perceive to be truth. And then I remember the damage of the Belfast "Peace Walls" and what it felt like to live in such a divided land whose divisions were kept by paramilitary violence and army sanctioned violence, and religious dividing lines that had existed for generations, guided by religious leaders who held tightly to those divisions.

As your pastor I feel called to call us to be so intentional as followers and disciples of Jesus in the months ahead and I know I can't, and we can't, do this alone.

So, what do we do? We ask for help.

We remember our teacher Ted who used to come to my office and say "It's hard to be a Believer and follower of Jesus! But this is what I am choosing, because Jesus is my life."

We remember Walter who put himself in the same room with people he'd always been told were the enemy and he offered them cookies.

But first and foremost, we call out to God help us learn to love like Jesus does because we can't do it alone: The author of 1 John writes: *God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; (1 John 9-12, 18)*

Love doesn't mean agreement.

Love doesn't mean voting the same way or believing the same way.

Love doesn't mean shifting another's truth, even when we can't agree with their truth.

Love doesn't mean turning a blind eye to injustice.

Jesus' kind of love, is deeper, and broader and wider and more inclusive than political parties, and candidates and voting platforms, and those truths that I'm most fervent about and you're most fervent about and that person you blocked on Facebook is most fervent about, because Jesus' love went to the cross for every single one of us, no exceptions,

so that all of us would be welcomed into the kingdom of God.

As an anonymous quote I read recently said;

"You'll never look into the eyes of someone that God doesn't love."

Or in the beliefs of our Jewish brothers and sisters, there is the spark of the Divine in each and every person.

We are called to decide **now** how we are going to walk into this political season, on the narrow path of faith, with love.

Love: the expansive, inclusive, God-given, not always easy,
but always worth it love of Jesus Christ,

that made room for all people, even you and me.

We are called to look into the faces of everyone involved in the coming elections
and see a child of God there...yes, everyone.

And we must keep asking God for help because we can't do this alone.

This morning, I prayerfully invite you to join me in deciding **now** how you are going to walk into this 2024 election cycle. May the love of Jesus Christ lead us. It is the only way. May we love because he loved us first. May it be so! Amen and Amen.