



“Paradigm Shift”
Scripture – Colossians 3:1-11
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, July 17, 2016

Much has been written about the simmering anger in our nation. Currently, there is widespread rancor and mean-spirited rhetoric that separates and divides. A number of polarities have taken hold: whites and minorities, rich and poor, Americans and foreigners.

In a recent piece, columnist David Brooks writes that he never understood until recently, how fascism could get a foothold in Europe. What it takes, he says, is for people “to begin to base their self-worth on their tribe, not their behavior. They become mired in their resentments, spiraling deeper into the addiction of their own victimology. They fall for politicians who lie about the source of their problems and about how they can surmount them. Facts lose their meaning.”¹

In some ways, it is odd that there is so much anger in our nation. The unemployment rate is below five percent. The violent crime rate is half of what it was at its height in 1991. Property crime has dropped by 43 percent.² Nine years ago we had 170,000 troops in Iraq; today there are less than 5,000. There is far less homophobia today than at any time in our nation’s past. Yet, many are contrary, callous and combative. Some seek to crucify anyone who sees things in a different light.

Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump surprised everyone in this year’s presidential race. How did they do it? They channeled the anger of many Americans.

We know that when we commit to becoming followers of Jesus, we pledge to live in ways that are just and loving. We are not always successful, but we strive to be compassionate and to treat others as we would want to be treated. When we fail, we do not simply brush it off or make excuses. We admit to ourselves and to God that we have fallen short; we ask forgiveness, and then we recommit to living as God expects us to live.

Writing to the Colossians, Paul says that we must change not only our behavior, but we must be on guard against destructive emotions. In verse five of today’s reading, Paul mentions both toxic desires and damaging behavior – sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, evil desire and greed. Then, in verse eight, he hones in on one specific matter that was tearing the Colossae congregation to shreds. He spotlights anger, and those attitudes and actions that orbit around it: malice, slander, abusive language and lying.

Who among us does not know what it is to be wounded by a loved one, and then to lash back? Rather than taking the vulnerable step of forgiving the other person and working to repair the relationship, we seek revenge. We try to inflict pain equal to or greater than the sting we have felt.

Paul is savvy enough to know that all of us have a dark side. We do not always choose what is positive and life-enhancing. Sometimes we cling to what is venomous and destructive. We can be compassionate, but we can be mean-spirited. We can be trustworthy, but we can be dishonest. We can be generous, but we can be greedy.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, “If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

Knowing that each of us occasionally embraces darkness rather than light, Paul writes, “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.”

What is Paul talking about when he says: “If you have been raised with Christ?” He is alluding to baptism. For Paul, the power of baptism is dying to our old self and being resurrected to a new self.

Paul continues, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” He is not encouraging followers of Jesus to become so focused on the afterlife that we pay little attention to our present life. Rather, he is calling on us to make a paradigm shift. He is calling for a change in our basic assumptions. He is calling for a change from one way of thinking to a new way of thinking which will transform us from one way of being to a new way of being.

Once we have been baptized as a follower of Jesus, we are to become new people who are not guided by the values of our culture, but by the teachings of Christ. We are to love others as ourselves, to forgive, to serve, to be generous, to reconcile broken relationships, and to strive for peace.

Paul knows we can choose darkness or we can choose light. He urges us to set our sights high and to be wary of the values that emanate from our culture or to follow the impulses that emerge from our passions. Anger can distort our thinking and take an emotional and physical toll on us. Paul calls on us to set our sights on Christ who reveals to us the things that produce healing, wholeness and hope.

Some forms of anger are justified; what we call righteous anger. That is, anger at injustice. Anger at cruelty. Anger at evil. I’m angry about terrorism and gun violence and racism and xenophobia. However, I must never forget that anger is such an intense and potentially lethal emotion that even my righteous anger can turn divisive and destructive. It needs to be channeled toward a constructive goal.

It is difficult for me to imagine someone volunteering for a suicide mission, except to remember why anyone commits suicide. It happens when someone loses hope. A terrorist who signs on for a suicide mission is someone who cannot imagine a better future and wants the people he believes are responsible to pay for it. His fury may be directed at a specific group – such as gays in Orlando or white police officers in Dallas – or it may be a group as broad as Westerners, vacationing families in Nice.

Relatives of the truck driver who mowed down people on the promenade told police that he could not control his anger. He would fly into fits of rage and break everything around him.³

We must stand firm against evil, but we must be vigilant not to become callous in the process. We must oppose violence, but we must not vilify people on the basis of their race or religion or ethnicity. We must stop terrorism, but we must not surrender to the idea that all Muslims are out to kill us.

Wherever possible, we must channel our outrage into positive action. ISIS and Al-Qaeda are trying to lure us into declaring war on Islam. We foil them when we build friendships and allies with Muslims. It seems to me that

World War II provides a good example for our war on terrorism. We fought the Axis powers on the battlefield and sought to destroy their ideology. But once the combatants surrendered, we helped rebuild their countries and befriended their citizens. Now, Germany, Italy and Japan are our friends and allies.

Violence often begets more violence and the spiral of death can destroy all that is decent and good and noble. How can we insure that does not happen?

Surely God wants us to figure out how in a world that is increasingly fragmented, we can foster connections; in a world that is often harsh how we can extend mercy; in a world that is becoming inhospitable how to exude kindheartedness; and into situations that are demeaning, how we can inject dignity.

We cannot allow anger to be our primary driving force. Righteous anger can motivate us to action, but it must be guided by love and focused on a positive outcome.

There is a cartoon that shows a man at the front of a long line of people who are waiting at the pearly gates. Saint Peter is standing there with a long white beard. He is tall and intimidating. The man in line had on a T-shirt, the cleaned up church version of which says, “Stuff Happens.” The man had his hand up and he is pleading with Peter, “Please, oh please, can I go home first and change my shirt?”⁴

What are the words you live by? Are you focused on the higher things?

Pope Francis has made quite an impact during his short tenure. He has talked about God’s love for all people, and he has expressed compassion and humility through service to people in need. TV host, John Stewart, who is Jewish, expressed the feelings of many when he talked about the Pope and said, “I just love this guy!”

It’s embarrassing to see people getting so excited about him and talking about how refreshing it is to see someone who is acting like a Christian is supposed to act. I wonder what would happen if all of us who claim to follow Jesus took Paul’s advice and “set our minds on things that are above” and we started acting like Christians.

NOTES

1. David Brooks, “Are We on the Path to National Ruin?”
2. Brookings Institution
3. Tarek Amara, Reuters, July 16, 2016.
4. Alyce McKenzie, “Finders Weepers, Losers Keepers,” May, 2016.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God – in whom we live and move and have our being – we come to you this day in gratitude for the new life we have in Christ. We give thanks that you have claimed us in the waters of baptism, and commissioned us for ministry to this world. As we gather again around this font, pour out your grace upon us. Renew us, transform us, and shape us into the people you created and call us to be.

Help us, who have heard your Word read and proclaimed, to live as disciples of the risen Lord. Set our minds on things that are above, and stir our hearts to follow you, that we might love with Christ’s love. Though you call us to new life, O God, we confess that we cling to the ways of this world – to habits that diminish, to emotions that strangle, to practices that tear away at your vision of wholeness for all. Re-create us, O God, and free us from the things that threaten to separate us from you. Transform our anger into *righteous* anger; channel our passion into

compassion; and turn our greed into a longing for justice and righteousness. Clothe us with loving kindness, and send us out as instruments of healing and peace.

We pray, O God, for this world in chaos, and lament the brokenness we see. The news of the week has – once again – left us heartbroken, overwhelmed, anxious, weary. We have run out of tears and out of words. But, you O God, hear even the silent murmurings of our hearts. So we entrust to you our unuttered longing, and pain, and hope. We lift before you the people of France, shaken from another devastating tragedy, and the people of Turkey, in this season of unrest. We lift before you those near and far whose suffering goes unnoticed, but whose stories are known to you. Surround them with your love that is stronger than death, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness.

Creator God, in the beginning you called forth order out of chaos. Breathe upon us now, we pray, and bring order to this chaotic world. By your Spirit, draw us – whom you have claimed and called – into your redemptive work. Clothe us with love and fill us with hope, that we might be living members of a living Christ – ready to bear witness to the Risen Lord, until your Kingdom comes. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who taught us to pray: Our Father ...