

The Last Sunday after Pentecost, November 20, 2016. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

Here we are on this last Sunday of the Christian year – I'm wearing white – a celebratory color, we're celebrating "Christ the King," we're only a few days away from Thanksgiving, and we get this gospel passage about the crucifixion! That's certainly enough to give one pause! I think we're supposed to stop and ask what's different. If Jesus is a king, his throne is a wooden cross. So what sort of Kingdom can it be if that's the case?

And what's this about a "New Year? We Christians have a different date for New Year's eve – it's always the Last Sunday after Pentecost – the religious version of December 31st. What might that mean for us?

Well, one way to figure that difference out is to wonder about the characteristics of the other New Year's Eve. So what happens December 31? Perhaps the biggest marker of the later one is that a ball drops in Times Square and we sing "Auld Lang syne" – a phrase which basically means "the good old days." There's a wistfulness in what is a rhetorical question: should we remember and try and rekindle old friendships from the 'good old days?' It is, I think, reflecting an awareness in all of us as human beings that "at the turning of the year" we pause, and reflect, and wonder how – in the face of a changing world – we can hold onto or rekindle the relationships, the friendships, that have been or continue to be important to us.

And isn't that one of THE questions that we so often fail to ask and answer each New Year's Eve? On this "turning of the year" day, then, how can that question inform who we are and who we are called to be?

I think that's a very hard question at this particular moment. For almost everyone I know – no matter where they stood or stand – the outcome of the elections only twelve days ago has – at least in the short term, and possibly longer – extinguished from our memories almost everything else that's taken place since the Last Sunday after Pentecost 2015.

And now, as we approach a special celebration, the media is full of Thanksgiving Survival guides where the standard fare seems to be "don't talk about politics!" I've heard that before at parties: "Don't talk about politics OR religion!" **I think that's a mistake for three reasons:**

1. First, it assumes that we as human beings are incapable of dealing with the mixture of disappointments and joys that real life brings us, the challenges of living together when we don't always agree. Rather, we're supposed to pretend that "everything's okay, really." The Truth? ***Our faith calls us into relationship despite our differences. How that's done is the issue, not whether or not to share what's happening in our lives.***
2. Second, it asks of us that we deny those with whom we have a relationship a part of ourselves that's really important to us – at the core of who we are. ***If you really love someone else you want to know the whole person, not just a facade designed not to hurt your feelings. How that's done is the issue, not whether or not to reveal that whole person***
3. As I said two years ago, the common translation we recognize easily of the Greek word

“*ekklesia*” is “Church (hence “ecclesiastical”). St. Paul used “*ekklesia*” to refer to the communities he founded exactly because that word was in common usage in his world – it meant “political assembly” and every Roman community had one. It wasn’t a religious assembly. Paul simply added “*en Christo*” to that word for his communities of believers: *ekklesia en Christo*; these nascent Christian communities were, he was saying **“Political assemblies in Christ.”** They were the same as the non-religious assemblies, except that everything they did was done in light of their baptism into Christ. **Our faith calls us not to disengage from the realities of the polis – the world in which we live – but to engage that world intentionally, thoughtfully, lovingly, and inexorably.** How that’s done is the issue, not whether or not we should engage our world.

The difference in all these things, then, is that, for us as Christians, it’s not a question of whether we hide part of ourselves in the interests of a false peace, but the way in which we engage each other as members of the Christian family.

So I suppose there’s another question: do we know ourselves well enough to be able to do all of this within the context of this Christian family? I find an answer in my past. I remember when I first came to this country in 1977 there was a very popular self-help book *called “I’m okay, you’re okay.”* It was a pop-psychology attempt to address some people’s gnawing sense of low self-worth. You can tell that the book was popular by the ones it spawned; my favorite follow-up was “I’m okay, you’re a brat!” But – joking aside – there were more serious responses. One was from a prominent psychologist, Dr. John Bradshaw, in his book “Healing the shame that binds you.” There he opined that upwards of 90% of all families are dysfunctional in one way or another. So rather than adopt a shallow view of the human condition, he said, we are called to acknowledge what’s holding us prisoner and then seek the healing that’s possible and available. This, he said, is a realistic view of the human condition

Taking what Bradshaw said, and casting it in the context of Christian theology, I came up with the title of a book to replace “*I’m okay, you’re okay.*” It was “*I’m not okay; you’re not okay, but with God we can, together, get to okay.*” That’s not a very sexy title for most publishers, but it makes the point. **Only by acknowledging and lamenting some of the dark passages in the human condition and story – especially our own – can we together access the healing grace of the Spirit.** That’s what “repentance and amendment of life” is all about.

I’ve heard a lot of talk about reconciliation in the past twelve days. I have to say that for me – a straight, white male – that language is much easier to access than it is for any fellow human being who is feeling threatened by other, more powerful people and is thus feeling vulnerable at the moment. Into that category fall many who are not white, not straight, and not male. Gay Clark Jennings, the President of the House of Deputies of General Convention (part of our national governing body) wrote about this last week to the Episcopal Church as a whole. She said:

The desire to foster “reconciliation” is deep in Christians’ bones, and it crops up in just about every statement about the election I have seen from a[ny] mainline church leader, but too often the church preaches reconciliation when what we really want is to avoid unpleasantness or get approval from worldly powers and principalities.

Repentance and amendment of life precedes reconciliation. Reconciliation requires the willingness of all parties (ALL PARTIES) to engage in the hard work it necessitates. Jennings says exactly this later in her letter:

“Reconciliation....may [currently] be out of reach, and it may be pastorally inappropriate for the church even to suggest it to people who now have legitimate reasons to be afraid.”

Last week I mentioned 200 hate-related incidents in the 48 hours after the election, including the use of ethnic and sexual slurs, and – chillingly – the profusion of swastikas. These crimes single out individuals because they are part of a minority group. That number has risen in nine days to 700 – and that’s just the tip of the iceberg - many go unreported.

As one of my clergy colleagues said to me last week, “if a sixteen year old comes to me and tells me her father has sexually assaulted her, it would be unethical – just plain wrong – for me to begin by telling her to go and be reconciled to her father. If a victim of rape come to me and asks me what she should do about the perpetrator it would be unethical – just plain wrong – for me to begin by telling her to go and be reconciled to her victimizer.”

So what’s the roadmap for us Christians as we move forward at this end of the Christian year? Lets end where we began, with “Auld Lang Syne’s” question. As a Christian I believe that, in the face of a changing world we CAN hold onto or rekindle the relationships, the friendships, that were important to us in “the good old days” – including those relationships and friendships with those who we may strongly disagree with at the moment. That belief, and a commitment to following through with all that it entails, has to be the foundation of the way we move forward. If it’s true that a “rising tide lifts all boats” then the reverse is also true: a falling tide lowers all boats. It’s in everyone’s interest to find a common way forward.

In the end, for us as Christians, it involves all of us being willing to “get real” about who we are as human beings, and also to take with the utmost seriousness our baptismal covenant, which **requires us** to persevere in resisting evil and personally repent when we fail; requires us to seek AND serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, even – especially – those with whom we profoundly disagree; **requires us** to work for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being – especially those with whom we disagree. **It begins with each of us. It continues with all of us. It begins here, it continues everywhere we go – because if we really mean what we say about being a Christian then we can’t with any integrity check our faith at the door as we leave.**

Let us pray: Good and gracious God, Holy One in our midst: we ask for the fresh breath of your Spirit to blow through us all. May we have the courage to embrace each other in spite of our differences, the strength to continue the common Christian struggle for a more equitable and just world; and the wisdom to remain with each other because we all share in a common commitment to the reign of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen