

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Lamentations 5:16-18
James 2:1-7

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Broken: Political and Cultural Divide

Worship Intro:

Today as we take time to honor those who sacrificed for our nation,
It seems appropriate that the last Broken place we address is the seeming
division in our country.

To remind ourselves of the call on our lives as Christians to bring people
together in unity defined by Jesus,

To follow the Holy Spirit's call to speak to those different than us,
And share the Good News that God loves all people, everyone.

One day this past week, I sat under a blue sky, with fluffy clouds and
caught myself dragged down by all the things I saw going wrong in our
country:

By what I disagreed with in the political realm.

By who I saw being left behind by our government structures.,.

By those I saw beaten, bruised, and killed by our inactivity towards
justice.

By the way our culture seemed to embrace division, and love the
divisive.

Today as we begin worship, I want you to remember that there have
been more divisive times in our world than there is today. In Jesus day,
revolution and oppression were just a stone thrown at a soldier of Rome
away from his people. As we begin, I invite you to reflect on how Jesus'
stories draw us out of ourselves and to each other in divisive times. I
want you to consider how you might be called to build a bridge, to
support the connection of neighbors in our nation and in our world.

Sermon:

There is a Appalachian folk tale that comes out of the time of the civil war.

Old Joe lived way out in the countryside, and he had one good neighbor. They'd been friends all their lives. And now that their spouses were buried and their children raised, all they had left were their farms... and each other.

But for the first time, they'd had an argument. It was over a stray calf that neither one really needed. It seemed as though the calf was found on Joe's neighbor's land and so he claimed it as his own. But Old Joe said, "No, that calf has the same markings as my favorite cow, and I recognize it as being mine."

Well, they were both a bit stubborn, so they just stopped talking to each other. That happened about a week before, and it seemed that a dark cloud had settled over Old Joe...until there came a knock at his door.

He wasn't expecting anybody that morning, and as he opened the door, he saw a young man who had a box of tools on his shoulder. He had a kind voice and dark, deep eyes, and he said, "I'm a carpenter, and I'm looking for a bit of work. Maybe you'd have some small jobs that I can help with."

Old Joe brought him into the kitchen and sat him down and gave him some stew that he had on the back of the stove. There was some homemade bread, some fresh churned butter and homemade jam.

While they were eating and talking, Joe decided that he liked this young fellow, and he said, "I do have a job for you. Look right there through my kitchen window. See that farm over there? That's my neighbor's place. And you see that crick

[creek] running right down there between our property lines? That crick, it wasn't there last week. My neighbor did that to spite me. He took his plow up there, and he dug a big old furrow from the upper pond and flooded it.

"Well, I want you to do one better. Since he wants us divided that way, you go out there and build me a fence – a big, tall fence – so I won't even have to see his place no more!"

And the carpenter said, "Well, if you have the lumber and the nails, I got my tools, and I'll be able to do a job that you'll like."

Joe had to go to town to get some supplies, so he hitched up the wagon and showed the carpenter where everything was in the barn. And that carpenter carried everything he needed down to the crick and started to work.

And his work went smooth and fast. He did his measuring and his sawing and his nailing. It was about sunset when Old Joe returned, and the carpenter had finished his work. When Old Joe pulled up in that wagon, his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open...because there wasn't a fence there at all.

It was a bridge, going from one side of the crick to the other! It had hand rails and all – a fine piece of work – and his neighbor was just starting to cross the bridge with his hand stuck out, and he was saying, "Joe, you're quite a fellow to build this bridge. I'da never been able to do that, I'm so glad we're going to be friends again!"

And Joe, he put his arms around his neighbor and said, "Oh, that calf is yours. I've known it all the time. I just want to be your friend, too."

About that time, the carpenter started pulling his tools into the box and then hoisted it onto his shoulder and started to walk

away. And Joe said, “Wait, come on back, young fellow. I want you to stay on. I got lots of projects for you.”

The carpenter just smiled and said, “I’d like to stay on, Joe, but you see, I can’t. I got more bridges to build.”¹

Today we are wrapping up our final part of our Broken series. We are doing it by addressing the what seems to be a growing political and cultural divide causing brokenness in our world. I dare say from looking at politics we could say that brokenness could be discovered best in our culture by what you are not willing to talk about over Thanksgiving Dinner with your family. The topics we have discussed in this series are things no one would bring up over that dinner table, because none of us like the discomfort of disagreeing viscerally with one another. That is what happens to us when we really disagree our body gets involved in the response and we sometimes treat others differently than we normally would think to treat another.

Our physical reactions to disagreeing with one another is something Jesus would have been all too familiar with. It is why he gave those simple third way instructions I taught a month ago to the teenagers when we talked about bullying. Let me remind you: turn the other cheek, walk another mile, give them your cloak too. All of these are meant to help us surpass our physical responses to fight back, flee, or freeze. Our fear responses is what these are and things which we will address in a different sermon series this summer called Unafraind.

Today though I want to focus on this sense of brokenness when we feel the culture and our politics is not working for us. And how we as Christians can work through that brokenness to create something beautiful in our communities.

¹ <https://winningtales.wordpress.com/2013/01/03/old-joe-and-the-carpenter-a-tale-from-appalachia/>

Our first scripture today comes from Lamentations, that book in the Bible that speaks to our deep despair and concern for the world. This lamentation in particular is about the fall of a nation and it is not far from the statements I hear made on talk radio.

Lamentations 5:16-18 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁶ The crown has fallen off our head.

We are doomed because we have sinned.

¹⁷ Because of all this our heart is sick;

because of these things our glance is dark.

¹⁸ Mount Zion, now deserted—

only jackals walk on it now!

There was a Pew Research Center study that compared statistics from 1994 and 2014 around political views. It shows that in 1994 Republicans and Democratic public officials were more similar in the voting 22 years ago than they were in 2014. Additionally, in the 1994 you would find that 16 % of Democrats and 17% of Republicans viewed their opponents unfavorably. Those numbers more than doubled 20 years later to 38 and 43 percent. Additionally the researches added a new category to reveal that 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans now view their opponents as a threat to the national well-being.² (Finally, the report tells us something I have heard many people conjecture, but with numbers it demonstrates that people on the right and left rarely change their viewpoints or talk to people whose views differ from their own.

The final statistic I took from this poll is rather interesting. Who of you remember the movie “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”? For those of you who don’t remember I only know about it because I remember my Pastor growing up showing a clip in church when I was young. In the movie a young white woman brings home her Black fiancé. All of this was in the time where people struggled with race. During that time people also struggled deeply when their children married people of

² <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>

different religions. The Pew study shows that people are now concerned about family marrying someone of a different political persuasion than of a different religion. You can see this played out in social media by how some people post one sided things, the talk radio people choose to listen to, or in the way some people pick a certain news station to watch.

This season of our political and cultural life in America may very well be about the soul of our country coming through divisive times with integrity. If we are a people of justice and freedom we may be called to truly live into those values in this age.

United Methodist Pastor Adam Hamilton says, “The most serious threat to America’s future is that we cannot talk with one another.”³ I believe what Adam Hamilton says because the rhetoric between people who disagree is not about the ideas they disagree on, but tend to be about how stupid the other side is. Again this is demonstrated in our electronic media: through memes on Facebook, the monologue takedowns of a person representing the alternative viewpoint on Fox News or Comedy Central, or the debasing of someone on talk radio.

Now, before we go idealizing political systems and how if we could just fix our system everything would be ok. I want you to remember what Winston Churchill said about democracy, “Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed **it has been said** that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time....”

Our democratic structure is designed to not build trust. We know that power corrupts even the best of people, and so our founders built in systems of checks and balances that we mimic in state, local and even our own United Methodist Church governance is based on. These

³ <https://vimeo.com/151428002>

structures were designed to raise doubts if freedom, liberty, or justice were at risk. They have done their job for over two centuries. If we think we should lean on our democratic systems to unite us, then that is probably not going to happen because they are designed to keep things in check.

Instead, what has brought cohesion to our brokenness as a people has been an understanding that all people are deserving of justice and freedom. A message rooted deeply in our scriptures, which the founders of our nation had access to.

One of those would have been our scripture from the wisdom book of James. That book of guidance for early Christians we have been studying these last months.

James 2:1-7 Common English Bible (CEB)

2 My brothers and sisters, when you show favoritism you deny the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been resurrected in glory. **2** Imagine two people coming into your meeting. One has a gold ring and fine clothes, while the other is poor, dressed in filthy rags.³ Then suppose that you were to take special notice of the one wearing fine clothes, saying, “Here’s an excellent place. Sit here.” But to the poor person you say, “Stand over there”; or, “Here, sit at my feet.” **4** Wouldn’t you have shown favoritism among yourselves and become evil-minded judges?

5 My dear brothers and sisters, listen! Hasn’t God chosen those who are poor by worldly standards to be rich in terms of faith? Hasn’t God chosen the poor as heirs of the kingdom he has promised to those who love him? **6** But you have dishonored the poor. Don’t the well-off make life difficult for you? Aren’t they the ones who drag you into court?⁷ Aren’t they the ones who insult the good name spoken over you at your baptism?

There may have been no more divisive time in our country's history than the Civil War. The divisiveness and our inability to make larger decisions to bring freedom and justice to all, wrought us with a war that cost us 620,000 lives. Abraham Lincoln knew the importance of the divisions of powers, and the needed mistrust in our political system not to corrupt. He also knew that it would not be our political structures that would hold us together. Instead he relied heavily on our common sense of what is right to name our injustices and sins, and call us to be a better people.

In his second inaugural address, which was shorter than my sermon, he addressed the “peculiar institution of slavery” and how it drove us apart through compromise that did not go far enough. And in the same short message he shared these words,

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.⁴

In a phrase he called us beyond our division, and beyond our malice toward those we disagree with to be a better people than many thought us capable of being after an awful and bloody divide.

While claiming and using the better nature that our scriptures call us to, Lincoln was also careful to never claim the power of God as something he wielded. There is an anecdotal story about Lincoln that displays this virtue, one grounded in our Christian scriptures.

⁴ <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>

During the US civil war Abraham Lincoln met with a group of ministers for a prayer breakfast. Lincoln was not a church-goer but was a man of deep, if at times unorthodox, faith. At one point one of the ministers said, “Mr President, let us pray that God is on our side”. Lincoln’s response showed far greater insight, “No, gentlemen, let us pray that we are on God’s side.”⁵

As Christian people, we are called to use love to build bridges in our world. We cannot do it by avoiding our faith and relying on the political structures to solve the world’s problem. Instead we must wield our faith as a tool to grow hope, to remind people that we are called to something more than our current place in history. We as Christians are called to love, God and love others in ways that bridge the divides in our world, and call us to a world built on justice and peace.

May we be people who allow God to wield us, to bring God’s peace in this world, and in turn may we find peace in our hearts knowing God is with us.

Shalom and Amen

⁵ <http://storiesforpreaching.com/whose-side-is-god-on/>