

Homily – Yellow and Green, Not Purple

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These days we use colors as codes. Purple, red, orange and yellow are the spectrum of colors that represent the stages of Covid-19 infection for our Counties here in California. Purple is the worst with the highest number of infections and the tightest restrictions on what is allowed to be open. Red is a bit better with fewer infections and restaurants can operate at 25% capacity indoors. Orange is even better and then there is yellow. Yellow is not back to the old normal, because there is no getting back to the old normal, but yellow is when most business operations are open with a few modifications. Interestingly, during the awful air quality a few weeks ago, I learned that the same color coding for Covid-19 cases is used to show air quality. Our air quality here in San Luis Obispo County was rated as purple for a while, but up north they were rated as brown. I pray that none of us ever reach the brown stage for Covid-19. Purple, red, orange, and yellow. We have all learned the code for these colors.

But, these days there is even a more famous color code – red and blue. Red has come to symbolize conservative, fundamentalist, or Republican, and blue has come to symbolize liberal, progressive, or Democrat. We all know this color code and sometimes we say that a place or an organization is purple, when it is a blend of red and blue. Some people in the place are conservative and some are liberal. The harder thing to be these days is to be a moderate. This would be a blend, just like purple, but for many a moderate is a traitor to both sides. We have become so polarized these days that moderates can be the enemy of both sides. We have become so divided that we are burning down the bridges between us. However, the Episcopal Church has traditionally played the middle. We have liked to see ourselves as halfway between Roman Catholic and Protestant. We like the middle in other ways as well.

This past week our Episcopal Presiding Bishop issued a video in which he continues to position our denomination in the middle. He correctly points out that we have good followers of Jesus who are red, we have good followers of Jesus who are blue, and we have good followers of Jesus who are purple. I think that is true here at St. Barnabas, though in my experience of you all, we tend to be a bluer shade of purple. And, my fear is that in November, after the election results are determined, that we will become more divided than we are today. However, my prayer is that we will be better able to see the things that connect us. I think this is your prayer as well. So, what are we going to do to make this prayer come true?

In his video, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has a couple of ideas. He points out that our church needs to continue with partisan neutrality but we should never move to a

place of moral neutrality. As you know, The Episcopal Church does not endorse, support, or oppose political candidates for elective office. However, this does not prohibit churches from engaging in voter education, voter registration, helping people get to the polls to vote, or even advocating for issues of public policy that are consistent with our spiritual beliefs about God. Voting is an act of moral agency. It is an act of moral discernment and decision. It is how a community or a nation decides how the moral values that it holds and shares shape public policy and the lives of its people. So, as followers of Jesus we must remember that partisan neutrality does not mean moral neutrality. Get out and vote.

In his message, Bishop Curry also suggests that we need to shift our thinking from WWJD, what would Jesus do, to WDJD, what did Jesus do. Did you catch that. Shift from “would” to “did” – what did Jesus do. And what Jesus did was always with love. The filter of love was put on every word and every deed that we know Jesus did. So, as we select between candidates or vote for or against State proposition we must use the love of Jesus as the filter through which we make decisions. When you use the love of God to love God back, love others, and love yourself, when you use love as a filter for your decision making then voting can become a sacred act. As followers of Jesus we need to make our vote a sacred vote. So, pray before you vote, pray while you vote, and for good measure pray after you vote. Pray and vote. Vote and pray.

Now, this morning’s Gospel reading leads me to two other things that we can do to find those connections and build those bridges that we want after the election.

In today’s reading we have two sons. The first son initially disappoints his father but in the end pleases him. The second son initially pleases his father but in the end disappoints him. In this story we are supposed to see God as the father and we are the sons. I should point out that we are actually both of the sons, for sometimes we please God and sometimes we disappoint God. However, in all instances we are supposed to embrace things in ourselves that need to change so that we can please God. I guess that includes pleasing God with our vote. Be that as it may the underlying foundation that is often ignored in this story is that the father loves both of the sons, just like God loves each and every one of us. And, as I have said before there is nothing we can do to increase God’s love for us, and there is nothing we can do to decrease God’s love for us. God loves all, and God’s love is eternal and unchanging. This means God loves those who vote red and God loves those who vote blue. And, in the same manner no matter how a person votes, we are also to love all.

And, as I read and reread this morning’s Gospel reading, I saw something else to help us after the election. Today’s reading is made up of five questions. Questions from the Temple authorities to Jesus and questions from Jesus back to the Temple authorities. Back and forth and back we have questions being lobbed. And, there is

an underlying expectation that the questions will have answers, black and white answers. Sometimes we call these either-or questions. This is the same expectation we have in a red and blue world. There are two sides and one has the answers and the other is just wrong. This can be true in our churches as well.

Back when I was seminary, I went to two seminaries at the same time. The first was a non-denominational evangelical seminary and the second an Episcopal seminary. Both seminaries would say that they had the answers to the ways that good Christians should do something, but they were often answers opposite to one another. Was one seminary right and the other seminary wrong? This was a lesson for me that the answers to life's questions are sometimes found outside the two sides to an argument. There can be a middle way or a third way. Instead of red, or blue, or purple, the answer may be found with yellow or green. When red or blue become dominant, maybe this is the time that something new from God is germinating.

Over and over Jesus teaches us that a dualistic way of thinking is not helpful in our lives. Answers are not black and white, red and blue, right and wrong. Out of the tension, out of the paradox, out of the pain comes something new that is yellow, or green, or pick another color. What are you seeing around you that may be a third way? And, if there is a third way will you embrace it, or will you discard it because you will only allow red or blue? In today's Gospel reading Jesus asks us to be open to change. And, sometimes it is only with twenty-twenty hindsight that we see the way that God was working in the world to bring light out of darkness.

Now, here are a few non-partisan organizations that are working to be the bridge and help a third way be revealed.

The National Institutes Forum promotes public deliberation about difficult public issues.

Living Room Conversations provides dialogue tools so that diverse groups of people can have meaningful conversations about things with which they disagree.

With Malice Toward None is an ecumenical nonpartisan program designed for churches and faith communities and groups of all kinds. This group, recommended by our Presiding Bishop, provides a way of understanding and healing for those on any side of the political spectrum.

And finally, "Make Me an Instrument of Peace: A Guide to Civil Discourse," is an online curriculum from the Episcopal Office of Government Relations.

As his followers, Jesus calls us to live into the tension of a non-dualistic creation in which there is often a third-way that arises from God. Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., all spoke of this as the nonviolent way of love. Look for the yellow and green things that are popping up around you and nourish them. And, pray for our elections and their aftermath. And remember, not all voting is of God, but all people are of God.