

# Faithfulness without Compromise

Preached on The Fifth Sunday after Trinity  
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ  
July 17, 2022  
Text: 1 Pet. 3: 8-15

As we have discussed several times, Trinity Season is focused on Christian attitudes and behavior. How are members of the *oikos*, the Household of God, to treat each other and even those they encounter outside the Church? A related question is: how can coherence or solidarity be maintained among God's people?

Concerning this latter question, the answer probably seems obvious. It will certainly rest heavily on love, compassion, kindness, a tender heart, a guarded tongue, and on seeking peace within the family. In other words, all the things St. Peter lays out at the beginning of the Epistle for today. Again, this may appear like common sense. If the Church is a family, doesn't what St. Peter says describe what we already know about healthy families?

Perhaps. Though we should also consider if what we believe about healthy families might owe more to the influence of Christianity than we are aware. It is very easy to blunt the force of Christianity by believing—wrongly—that its message is one of which sensible people have always approved. A moment's thought should bring to mind the many places in the New Testament where our Lord and his apostles warn us about persecution and downright hatred directed at those who follow Jesus. Assuming that churches did occasionally contain true followers of Christ and not just obnoxious pretenders, why would they meet persecution if what they exhibited was universally applauded moral uprightness?

One reason is that Christians presented a community that was a threat to political power because it relativized that power. In the ancient world, the choice was generally allegiance to some human political power or exile. But here was a group held together with a strong allegiance to a kingdom that transcended all earthly kingdoms, and against which these kingdoms could not finally compete. They were not bound together by force, nor ethnicity, nor lines on a map; on the contrary, their fellowship crossed ethnic and political boundaries. This was something new. And it was definitely a threat to the status quo.

Christians belonged to a society they believed surpassed all others in the things that mattered most. They also challenged the reigning value system, as we've spoken of before. These things put them at odds with the Greco-Roman culture. If Christians were just inculcating virtues about which there was general agreement, there would not have been this friction. But they were following Jesus as Lord, and this created problems. They did not sacralize the Roman Empire or divinize the Emperor. The Church was an outpost of the true empire headed by Christ. She would tolerate no rivals.

Following Jesus meant adopting his mentality, having one mind among Christians that modelled his. Looking again at the beginning of the Epistle, the Greek term that the King James translates as being “of one mind” occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but Paul frequently uses a similar expression that also connotes a unity of mind. This “like-mindedness” is ultimately to be found in our loyalty to Jesus and our intentional appropriation of his way of life. Paul exhorted the Philippians to “have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.”

Having a mind like Christ entails that we all have “*compassion one of another.*” The Greek word here means pretty much what our word “compassion” literally means—“to suffer with, to feel with” your brother or sister in Christ. Peter is exhorting us to have deep feelings of compassion for one another, to feel one another’s pain, feel one another’s joy.

Peter next describes single-minded Christians as those who “*love as brethren—as siblings.*” The word used here is *philadelphoi*. We are probably at the very heart of Peter’s exhortation here. He obviously aligns with St. Paul. “*Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.*” It is true that Paul is speaking of love for God here, but the overflow of our love for God is love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Love is the sum of it all. Again, surprisingly, this word denotes not only behavior, but an emotional attachment and commitment to one another. Our family is the Family of God. This brotherhood and sisterhood among us is by virtue of our Baptism into Christ. In this case, Christ and the Apostles would insist that “water is thicker than blood!” Our spiritual kinship is based upon the fact that we have the same Father as Jesus Christ, who is our elder brother. We should follow his example in love. The fact that Christians regarded one another as brothers and sisters did not go unnoticed by their contemporaries in the pagan world.

Christians should also be tenderhearted with each other. Our translation says we should be “pitiful,” which is a bit misleading to modern ears. The idea is that we are already pre-disposed to care for one another, to be sensitive to each other’s needs and vulnerabilities. We see here just how important the “feeling life” of the parish church was to the Apostles. Feelings were not dismissed or belittled. Our emotional life is part of our humanity, just as it is part of our Lord’s incarnation. He felt deep sadness and grief over the death of his friend Lazarus. And he was tenderhearted toward Mary Magdalene and even the thief beside whom he was dying.

Finally we get Peter’s last word describing the mind of Christ within the community. Unfortunately, the King James translates it as “courteous,” though the Greek word means “humility” or “humble-minded.” Seeing humility as a virtue was problematic in the world of the early Christians, as we have seen before. The Greco-Roman world radically opposed Christian humility. In the highly aggressive and socially stratified world of Roman antiquity, only the degraded and dishonored person was “humble.” The weak and shameful were incapable of defending their honor. “Humility” was a character flaw revealing self-contempt—and for that matter contempt for proper social order. This was subversive.

But Christians were just following in the footsteps of Jesus whom they loved. All these imperatives were descriptive of how they conducted themselves within the Household of God. They deeply loved one another and they were committed to one another far beyond anything that made sense to their pagan neighbors. One could feel the solidarity and cohesion that bound their lives together as the Family of God. It is our duty as children of God to consciously and intentionally live these imperatives—individually and as a community.

Now in these fractured and polarized times, many Christians yearn for our nation to achieve this cohesion and solidarity through a return to our Christian roots. They want us to see ourselves as a Christian nation once again, restoring what has been removed or suppressed by the godless elites seeking to destroy Christian America. Now there is certainly nothing wrong with Christians wanting their countries to reflect Christian values in their laws and policies. But the problem occurs with an over-identification of the cause of Christ with the interests of a nation, often ruled by people with values at odds with the Christianity.

In fact, it is difficult to see how normal statecraft can proceed without this being the case. Despite the best intentions of Christian Nationalists, the “nation part” quickly overshadows the “Christian part.” The best a nation can be is “Christian-adjacent.” To paraphrase Alexander Schmemmann, a state can be Christian just insofar as it recognizes its limit; the Christian state refuses to become an absolute value, *the end*, and acquires genuine value in only in subordination “to the only absolute value, that of God’s Kingdom.

But many people are not satisfied with this subordination, and wish instead for America to be absolutely central to God’s purposes in the world. They see America as the beneficiary of God’s covenant promises. When Peter wrote that [y]ou are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” he was speaking of the Church. But many American Christians believe he was writing about America.

Following David Koyzis (*Political Visions and Illusions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), we can enumerate four difficulties with this sort of nationalism which can lead to very unchristian outcomes. First, it unduly applies Biblical promises intended for the Body of Christ as a whole to a particular group of people living under a particular political framework. One strains to find any Scriptural warrant for this, regardless of how many early colonists and their successors saw their new land as the New Israel. (117-8) Second, this nationalism “tends to identify God’s norms for political and cultural life with a particular, imperfect manifestation of those norms at a specific period of a nation’s history.” (118) Third, “Christian nationalists too easily pay their nation a homage due only to God...[t]hey see [their nation’s] history as somehow revelatory of God’s ways and are largely blind to the outworkings of sin in that same history. Fourth, “Christians most readily employing the language of nationhood may find it difficult to conceive the nation in limited terms. Frequently, Christian nationalists see the nation as an undifferentiated community with few if any constraints on its claims to allegiance.” (118)

This should make clear the dangers of trying to manufacture by human means what can be brought about only through God's hands. Human attempts to build the Kingdom of God usually require propaganda and falsehoods at the outset, something Christians need to call out. Great evil usually is birthed by an indifference to truth. Dubious uses of Scripture, flattering origin myths, an alleged golden age frozen in amber, whitewashing of a nation's history, and idolization of some political system may not strike us as very bad. But justifications of horrendous evil are soon built on these distortions. Nations built on lies will use violence and coercion to maintain those lies, becoming demonic in the process.

This is not to say that all nations are hopelessly corrupt, excusing Christians from any political involvement. It is merely to say that we should be humble enough to recognize that human visions of what God wants are cloudy and often self-serving. Things become even more cloudy when Christians get a taste of power. We will do the most good for this troubled world when we are not beholden to the powerful, who will dump us when we are no longer useful. If we live as Peter and the other apostles enjoin us to, God will be able to use our faithfulness to his glory and the good of creation.

*In the Name...*