February 16th, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Epiphany 4

10:30am

Who’s the Leader?

1. Who’s the Leader?

Who’s the leader? That’s an appropriate question these days. As our televisions highlight candidate debates and journalists write articles. As candidates are endorsed, as rumors fly, as the census rolls in – I’m not sure about you, but it’s only February and it feels like it’s just too much already. There’s too much data to take in, too many candidates, too many options – and it swirls as we prepare for primaries and the election in the fall.

And as a pastor, who ends up speaking with a lot of other pastors, we’re told to keep quiet on the political front. You hear it – the division of church and state and warnings that you could lose your job for even using the word ‘political’ in a sermon. We are encouraged to walk on eggshells, to be careful, to tiptoe. And this warning has some bearing – for if I came in here and preached to you who to vote for and told you that you weren’t Christian if you didn’t vote for whoever – that would be inappropriate. Absolutely. An abusive use of the power of the pulpit.

But what I also find tricky about that warning is that we are whole people – I do not walk into this sanctuary just as Church Becca and I do not go to my voting station as Political Becca. I am not multiple people – I am a child of God who is called to be whole and to integrate my faith and politics and beliefs and values and all into who I am. I believe that’s the same for each of us – and I don’t really care, in the best way possible – who you vote for – who you decide to call your human leader – and honestly – I have no idea who I am voting for - but I encourage us to live as a child of Christ, looking for a leader who you believe will best reflect the values of God’s Kingdom here on earth.

1. Corinthians

And what’s interesting here, is that though church and state were definitely not divided in the time of the Corinthians, they also reflect the human struggle we live in today – who is your leader. For some folks, it was Apollos, for others it was Paul and they got caught up in glorifying their leader, rather than God. So, Paul is trying to do a course correction.

And we have the same temptation – because there’s that inherent need as a human being to belong to something. We do it in many corners of our life – whether that’s politics, or our denomination, or being a part of the Lions club or Moose lodge, or scouts, or whatever organization that comes to mind. And belonging is a good thing, it secures us, it gives us community, it grants us a feeling of protection and unity.

For instance, I am proud to be a Presbyterian. I’ve tried to be UCC, but I can’t – it’s not who I am. I love the UCC, but I love our polity, our confessions, our creeds, our history, and particularly since I was born into a Presbyterian family, it reminds me of this very warm feeling of home. Now, what would be problematic is if I said something like – I’m Presbyterian and anyone who isn’t is not a Christian. Presbyterianism is the right denomination, Christianity is the right belief system for everyone and I am going to judge people who do not believe the way I do. So then my belonging turns into a means of discrimination.

Here’s a brief slight joke from this week. I can’t remember the exact words that were said at our bell practice, but I had just come from a meeting at the Presbytery that drove me a bit nuts, so I was feeling a bit punchy. Someone said something along the lines of, ‘How long does it take a Presbyterian to do to ...something’ and I quipped back without even thinking, ‘how much time do you have?’ I feel like the eyes of the bell choir turned to me and I just said, “It’s been a rough Presbyterian day.” And there’s some funny beauty in that – that I can love and belong to the Presbyterian church, but I also can recognize and find humor in the human logistics of what it looks like to belong to a human institution.

1. Ashes to Ashes

As we turn back to the Corinthians – Paul provides this

important point – Paul and Apollos may have offered some great teaching and education to the people, but they planted the seed, and God waters. And that’s the same truth today. Paul died. Apollos died. And yes, in their legacy, they taught people, but the real leader, the true leader, who helped cultivate faith in the deepest parts of the Corinthian people’s being – that was God.

And soon, on a dark Wedneday night, you and I will meet face to face and I will put ashes upon your head, and tell you that ashes to ashes, dust to dust – we are mortal. We are finite. We are here for a time. And what we do during that time is important, but it’s also important to remember that we do not have forever. When I preach, or teach, or offer words of hope – it is important, it is meaningful, but I trust that the Spirit will be the one who really enters in and provides the growth in all of us. We are here for a time, and while that might make you feel sad, it’s also a beautiful reminder of living in the moment.

1. Leaders are Finite

So, if I am finite, if you are finite, if we are bound to live on this earth for a time, the same is true for our human leaders. Whoever you decide as your candidate of choice – however you feel about the political climate of the day – it is valid, it is important – but also bring in the bigger picture: this isn’t forever. I remember sitting down at the reception of one of saints who we lost in the last year or so and reading that she lived through, perhaps it was eleven presidents. I marveled at how much she had seen, how much change she had lived through, and through her life – it reminds me again and again that throughout the course of our own lives, we will see incredible change. Some change we will like, some we will not, and it will leave a legacy – so may we choose the finite leader that leads to a healthy legacy.

Trump? Finite. Warren? Finite. Sanders? Finite. Buttgieg? Finite. Klobachar? Finite. All of the other candidates I can’t remember? Finite. All of our local representatives and senators, all of our folks on the board of education? Finite.

And this isn’t to tell you to not care, actually, quite the opposite. Learn about the candidates, see where you align your hopes and dreams for the future of our county and country. The news is both good and bad – if you are happy or not happy with the leadership in our world – the reality is, it’s not forever. Yes, the legacy may stick, but God’s Kingdom will always burst forth. Things change, we evolve, the Presbyterian faith even encourages that hopeful sense – reformed and continually reforming.

1. God

I think the message that Paul is seeking to convey is one that is very relevant for us today and will continue to be. Whether it’s the political world or other places of belonging, put it in the frame of the Kingdom to come. Who, do you believe, who is the Spirit calling you to who you sense will best bring God’s light, love, peace, justice, hope, and newness into this world? And remembering that whoever you pick is human, remember the bigger picture, that whatever happens, that God is the leader. God has been, is, and always will be the leader, no matter the human systems we invent. So as a people of God, led by the Spirit, called to follow Christ’s lead – let us put our faith in God, rather than humans and let us strive in our own humanity to bring the Kingdom here on earth with hope and love, and use our vote to leave a joyful legacy for our children and children’s children. Amen.