

Minding the Gap
Isaiah 49:1-7, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9
First Presbyterian Church
January 15, 2017
MLK, Jr. Sunday

Isaiah 49:1-7 49 Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ²He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. ³And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." ⁵And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— ⁶he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

⁷Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sermon

In the London subway system, as a train pulls up to a stop you hear a recorded announcement: "Mind the gap!" it says. In other words, "Pay attention to the gap between the platform and the train lest you fall." Philip Yancey uses that image to reflect on WHO and WHERE we are as a nation following last year's election and entering the presidency of Donald Trump. "Today, both parties push toward the extremes, in opposite directions, he says... with the division so severe at this point that in its Person of the Year cover story, Time magazine gave Donald Trump the title, "President of the Divided States of America." You will certainly remember the image of our nation's most recent electoral map - with blue on either margin separated by a large sea of red in the middle.

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist some of us heard interviewed in our TED Talk last Wednesday evening. And one of the many interesting things he said was that in our country today each group – meaning conservative/liberal...and each political party - Republican/Democrat...each side in this great divide lives within its own moral world...its own ideological matrix...and he described a situation some of us may find very familiar. He had us imagine two families...living in two houses... next door to each other. In one house lives the Blue family. They have very clear ideas about what the threats are to our country right now... they are equally clear that the progressive agenda provides the best solutions. They have all the facts to back up their positions...and they just can't understand why other people can't see it. Next door to the Blue's is the Red family...they look pretty much the same but they live in a completely different moral matrix. You see, they, too, are very clear about what threatens our country right now and equally clear that the conservative approach is the right one. Like the Blue's, they have all the facts to logically argue in support of their position...and frankly, they aren't much interested in hearing anything else.¹

Philip Yancey writes, "A nation so divided is not a healthy nation," And then, speaking to Christians, he says: "We need to mind the huge gap that risks making our nation divisible."² I couldn't agree with him more...and this morning I want us to reflect for a few minutes on why we are called to mind the gap and how we might do that.

As to why - I believe that as Christians we are called to care about the things God cares about. God calls us to value what God values...to make God's priorities our priorities...and when we read the Scriptures we find that God cares about the towns and cities and nations we live in... God cares about the people who live in those towns and cities and nations...and God cares about the governments and institutions which have power over us. So I do believe that God cares about what is happening in our nation right now; and that as God's people we should, too.

Second, I believe that Christians are not only called to MIND this gap that so divides us, we are WELL-EQUIPPED to do this. I mean, this is what Christians do, my friends... at least it is what we've been trying to do for over 2,000 years: to bring people of different races and backgrounds, different places and cultures...to bring them together around our common commitment to Jesus. This is what the Lord was concerned about when just before his crucifixion, he taught his disciples to love one another as he had loved them. Because it's by this love we have for one another that everyone else will know we are his disciples. Love is the mark that Jesus gave us to wear before the world...And love... Jesus' kind of love...makes it possible for people who have passionately different beliefs to still find unity.

And third, I believe that as Christians we have a unique way to think about these matters...a way that is very different (refreshingly different) from what we hear coming from our politicians and party loyalists and commentators. For example, you may come to an election and you may believe that one party's candidate better reflects the values that God cares about. I may approach a public policy decision and believe that one party's position does the same. But we also know... as Jim Wallis reminded us way back in 2005, "God is not partisan...God is not a Republican or a Democrat.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_can_a_divided_america_heal#t-1191238

² Philip Yancey

And the best contribution that people of faith can make is to not be ideologically predictable nor loyally partisan...because “faith must be free to challenge both the right and the left from a consistent moral ground.”³ As Christians we take our guidance and our marching orders NOT from a party platform, but from the life Jesus modeled for us. And the truth is... at least for me...that if I actually do that – I find that neither label – conservative or liberal... Republican or Democrat... neither label adequately holds the values and principles that I hold as a follower of Jesus.

Let me illustrate...in a sermon to New York City’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Pastor Tim Keller named eight characteristics of our early Christian forbears who lived under a Roman government that was far less accepting of Christianity than ours is.

Keller says these early Christians held to these eight principles:

- Opposed bloodthirsty sports and violent entertainment such as gladiator games
- Opposed serving in the military
- Opposed abortion and infanticide
- Empowered women
- Opposed sex outside of marriage and homosexual activity
- Encouraged radical support for the poor
- Encouraged the mixing of races and classes
- Insisted Jesus is the only way to salvation

Now, having heard these eight principles, I want to go back over them and I want you to listen carefully and try to apply our modern labels of conservative or liberal to each one. To make it easier you may want to count the conservative on your right hand and the liberal on your left.

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Now, I don’t know about you, but for me exactly half of these principles reflect what I would call “traditional conservative values” and the other half reflect “traditionally liberal values”. Of course, and that’s the point. It is our job as Christians to address the ways in which both party’s visions either express or fall short of our understanding of God’s will for this world that is so precious to Him. Neither side (if you put it that way) has exclusive claim on the truth... neither side has all the solutions to the issues and challenges that we face in our world.

³ Jim Wallis in *God’s Politics: A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America*, (Harper-2005), Introduction.

And even though at some level we know this is true, what this last election revealed is that we do not know each other...and because we don't know each other we are not talking with each other. Sociological and demographic studies are showing that in this country we are sorting ourselves into like-minded enclaves in which we talk and listen only to people we know agree with us... or if we do happen to engage someone with different views, we simply talk past each other. Well, again, call me unrealistic but I believe this is where the church comes in...this is how the church really matters...because church is the place where people who differ can still recognize the image of God in one another. Church is the place where each and every one of us realizes that we are all sinners who are forgiven by a gracious God. Surely this is one of the ways we can be a light to the nations...surely this is one of the ways we can inspire those outside of the church to say about us: "Look how they love one another."

Yet, that is hard... and nobody should say otherwise. And it's particularly hard when our disagreements involve passionately held values and principles. I was taken by an email I read last week from an urban pastor. She is admittedly on the more progressive side of things and therefore she was shocked and deeply saddened by the election results. But I think what she wrote captures a sense of what I'm trying to say this morning. "Being a Christian is hard." she began. "Throughout the last few days I have thought about how much easier it is for me to be a "left of center leaning progressive" than it is for me to be a Christian. As a political party member I can vent and debate, mock and obfuscate other's policies. As a Christian I must lean in and listen; I must embrace and include. While the political part of me seeks revenge, ("Let the markets crash! Watch Putin's advances with a weakened NATO! See the dismantling of America's leadership!") the Christian in me must pray for the welfare of the city, our country and the world. The claims of Christ demand that I seek the things that make for peace. I can't mock those who voted for Trump or suggest that the rise of the "know nothing" party is complete. I don't get to paint them with a wide brush of ugly words. And perhaps most temptingly, I can't try and write off the "other" Christians who supported President-elect Trump. That's not allowed. Like me, they are beggars of grace. And the One from whose hand we have equally received will not allow me to stand close while my heart is far away. And then, she concluded, "God is still redeeming the world and asking us to participate."

Please join us in praying for our country. Pray for the losers and the winners. Pray for people of good will to reach out to their neighbors and friends. Pray that we may find a way forward for all of us together. Pray that the character of Christ will also be the character of his people."

This weekend marks the 88th birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a man who entered the political fray...yet sought to do so without losing his religion. With a clear sense of what was right and what was wrong...with a clear sense of what was just and righteous...and with a clear sense of urgency, King set out to use power to end segregation laws and attain the full inclusion of minorities in the life of this nation. Unwilling to wait any longer for what had been promised more than a century before and what the Constitution clearly guaranteed, he was determined to expose and confront what has been called America's original sin – the sin of racism. Yet, Dr. King was a student of history and he knew that history is most changed by movements with a spiritual foundation.⁴ He knew that the Christian draws on a different power – the power of love...that the Christian wields different weapons in political conflict – the weapons of grace.

⁴ Wallis, p.24

And he was able to lead a movement that combined brutal honesty about the sin of racism with the weapons of nonviolent resistance to accomplish unprecedented change.

King understood his ultimate loyalty was to God and that his real goal was not to defeat the whites, but “to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority...so that he, too, might break free from the chains that bind him. The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community.”

So what can we do? Well, I turn again to Jonathan Haidt in the TED Talk last week who encouraged each person in the audience to reach out to someone they knew was on the other side. Everybody has a cousin or neighbor or someone they sit next to in the pew on Sunday who is on the other side...reach out to them and tell them you want to talk...and before you do, he said, make sure to read Dale Carnegie’s “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” There was laughter in the crowd, but he said he was really serious because in a book like that we find techniques that help open up difficult conversations like this. For instance, you can say something like: “I know that we disagree, Uncle Bob, but, you know, something I have always respected about you is that you aren’t afraid to laugh at yourself.” Everybody can find something to affirm and compliment in the other person...and we should make sure to do that before diving into the more difficult stuff.

The point is – it’s one thing to talk about “minding the gap” – it is quite another to do something about it. As they were leaving the session Wednesday evening, Jay and Mary Ann Crane were already thinking about who they would reach out to. I suppose that means I should as well. Will you join us?