

Friendship as Social Witness

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Dr. James Calvin Davis
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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Text: John 15:9-17

So in my effort to not totally forget what it means to be a Presbyterian now that I worship regularly with New England Congregationalists, I sit with a group of theological ethicists who work with the Presbyterian Church (USA) Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (or ACSWP). What ACSWP does is study public issues and then drafts denominational statements or position papers on those issues, for endorsement by the entire denomination. In recent years, ACSWP has produced papers on tax reform, voting rights, gun legislation, and military action. These papers stake out a position on those kinds of issues, and if they are adopted by the entire denomination, they become the public position of the Presbyterian Church.

Many mainline denominations produce these kinds of public statements, and what my group of theological ethicists is charged with doing is helping the committee give these statements theological weight and consideration. The problem is that I have been increasingly uncomfortable with the exercise. Some of my discomfort is with the quality of what is produced; while some of the statements have been pretty good, too often they betray a naivety or thinness or lack of expertise that makes them insufficient responses to complex problems. Some of my discomfort is generational; the whole exercise seems rooted in a time we no longer live in, when the greater public actually cared what mainline denominations had to say about public issues. The statements seem to presume a public prerogative that just isn't there anymore. But perhaps my biggest problem with the exercise is that issuing a position statement for a denomination as theologically diverse as the Presbyterian Church assumes a consensus that just isn't there, so that the position statement itself often becomes the focus of disagreement and division, because large segments of the church point out that its position does not speak for them.

Increasingly, then, I've come to think that this is the wrong way to approach what Christians often call "social witness," representing the implications of the Gospel to the larger world. Insisting that the Gospel has broader implications for the world is entirely appropriate for Christianity, for this religion has never claimed that it possesses a truth only meant for a select few, or a spirituality that's only personal and private. But statements that stake out a single position on contested public issues pretend that mainline churches are something we are not, a group of likeminded people who have drawn similar conclusions about social issues from the faith we share. That's just not reality in the church, and so the presumption of consensus results in consternation and alienation among Christians who feel their church is speaking for them in a way that does not represent their convictions.

But if position papers on public issues are not the most effective social witness in today's Presbyterian Church, then what is? More and more, I look around our churches and

see people of very different theological and ideological perspectives struggling to maintain fellowship with one another, and I wonder if that effort is our social witness. One has to be oblivious not to recognize that the church is filled with people who are different from one another—races and ethnicities, gender identifications, politics, personalities, cultural backgrounds, mental and emotional makeups, theologies and ideologies. And yet the church—when it is truly being church—binds all of those differences together into a single community dedicated to the project of caring for one another through its differences. Perhaps in that practice of friendship lie the seeds for effective social witness.

If you ask me, that's the message in today's Gospel reading. In John's narrative of Jesus' life, this piece we read today captures an intimate time with his disciples when he is foreshadowing his departure in death. At the same time, John writes his account years after Jesus' life, with a community of Christians in mind who are trying to answer the question of what it means to be a follower of Jesus if he is not here with them like he was with those first disciples. This is what it means, John's Jesus says. Following him means being loyal to him and the things he believed in. Loving him shows in doing what he asked us to do, what he commanded that we do. And what did he command? "This is my commandment," said Jesus, "that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Not believe the same exact same thing. Not subscribe to a theological checklist. Love one another, be in peace with one another, reassure and support one another. Relish in one another's friendship and companionship, and in that experience of community know my Spirit that binds and inspires you together.

Being a community of friendship, bound together by allegiance to this one called Jesus—that's what it means to be church. That character of loving friendship seeps through so many of the ritual practices that mark us as church. Think about it! That Christians insist on getting together at this hour every week, with so many other things we could be doing—how odd is that, unless it is our friendship in the name of Christ that draws us together? The weekly sharing of prayers; the genuine enthusiasm for baptisms into Christian community; the regular celebration of the central symbol of Christian community—the Lord's Supper, Communion, a ritual that captures the experience of sharing with each other the love of God and one another. These are the practices of communities centered on keeping Jesus's commandment, to love one another as God loves us. That is church as a community of character and friendship in Christ.

As we look at our polarized nation this election season, we have to know that a recipe for maintaining community in the midst of sharp disagreement is the social witness our country needs to hear. In a political culture that takes an eye for an eye, a barb for a barb, a lie for a lie, and threat for a threat for granted as the gospel of "politics as usual," modeling a community of mutual care who love one another through their difference is an essential word of good news.

Our world has become very small over the course of a generation. Events in faraway places affect us in very real ways right here. Things people on the other side of the globe do have an impact on our lives, and vice versa. And we've navigated that shrinking world largely by treating it as a threat. Hostility has become our way of dealing with a world that

is getting closer and closer to us. Is there a better way to deal with global conflict and difference?

I went to the Albany Presbytery meeting at Silver Bay earlier this summer, and during that meeting, we spent a lot of time asking what it might mean to be Albany Presbytery, to be Presbyterians in this region five years from now. What will we be doing, or not doing? What kinds of practices or structures will we have in place? What will our meetings be about? What kind of impact will we be having on this area?

My own dream is that the church's future here, around our country, and around the world will not be preoccupied with declining membership rolls or intractable theology debates. Instead our future will include modeling friendship as an antidote to the incivility and violence around us. Our future will be in our embrace of the differences we hold in church, in the pursuit of Christian truth and justice together through our differences. Our future will be in the exhibition of humility and patience, faithfulness and forbearance with one another, and by doing so testifying to the Gospel of God's reconciliation of all people in Christ.

I know churches can do this. I know this in part because I have seen it. I see it in congregations like my own, an incredibly ideologically diverse group of people who don't ignore their differences or obsess about them, but instead insist that we will be the Body of Christ in the face of those differences, and show our community what living through difference with respect and love really looks like.

I suspect you see it here. I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that you all don't see think the same way, believe the same things, approach problems and opportunities with the same judgment. Yet here you are, sharing friendship as the Body of Christ in this community.

I hear about it in the story of Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church and Urban Hope Community Church in Birmingham, Alabama, a city that continues its struggles with a deep history of racism. Oak Mountain, a predominantly white and affluent congregation, and Urban Hope, a predominantly black church with a substantial number of its congregants living in poverty, have taken it upon themselves to create counter-cultural bridges across racial and socio-economic lines. The two churches came together to watch the 2014 film *Selma* and to talk about the struggle for civil rights. They have worked together on community-action programs related to job procurement, small business development, spiritual wholeness, and youth education. Through it all, they have pushed back against the assumption that white Americans and black Americans cannot create true communities of justice and friendship together.¹

What does friendship as social witness look like? It looks like a congregation that reaches out to its local mosque to facilitate greater understanding between Christians and Muslims. A cohort of churches hosting an organizing forum to welcome Syrian refugees into the local community practices friendship as social witness. Congregations who host

¹ Carmen Sisson, "Building Relationships across Racial Lines," *The Christian Century* 8/3/15.

local non-partisan discussions of public issues, to intentionally bring together ideologically different groups as an educational alternative to dysfunctional media coverage, practice friendship as social witness. Christians who light up Facebook with messages of sympathy and solidarity for an LGBTQ community rocked by terrorism offer friendship as social witness. Anytime the church practices the virtues of Christian community within itself and then beyond itself, into a world desperate for reconciling love, we practice friendship as public ministry.

And I think exporting that experience is arguably our most effective social witness policy. We all are painfully aware that mutual concern is not an apt description of American political culture at this moment. The incivility, insults, vengeance, rage, and distrust that dominate our political culture right now have us heading down a dangerous path, never mind the conflict that terrorizes our so-called “global community.” In the context of all of the hostility and division and violence we see around us, perhaps the church needs to own more enthusiastically its chance to model something different, namely communities of mutual concern and civility who keep one another accountable to the obligation to love and respect one another through the things that divide us.

In a way, that’s always been the vision of the Christian church, to share with the world beyond it a different way of being human, inspired by the conviction that God loves us and abides with us in our everyday. The theologian Karl Barth used to describe the church as the “provisional representation of humanity.” By that Barth meant that what the church experiences ideally in its own community—love of God and one another—foreshadows God’s ultimate intentions for the world. Unity in diversity... radical inclusivity... reconciliation with other human beings and all of creation... mutual concern... peace...community... friendship—all lived out as expressions of gratitude for the good news that God first loved us. That’s what it means to be a gospel community. So why shouldn’t that be our witness to the world?