

Disciplines to Disarm a Divided Nation

A Post-Election 2016 Sermon on Matthew 26:51-52—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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There's nothing like a presidential election to remind us Jesus says he does not come to bring peachy keen unity [Matthew 10:34-35]. He does not expect or try to teach the world to sing Kumbaya in perfect harmony, but will cause divisions within the world and among families (does that sound familiar?).

But in today's reading, Jesus says to his disciples who start to physically defend him, "Put away your swords." Christians can listen to Jesus calling us today to put down our swords, to be disarmed, to not let our anger or defensiveness create divisiveness where it will not glorify God.

Today is a day to reflect on how we as Christians heed the call of Jesus to put down the political and spiritual swords that many of us have drawn to defend ourselves from the perceived threat of each other. Our country has been divided over recent decades in so-called 'culture wars' and has seen that division manifest itself prominently this week with the surprise election of Donald Trump to become our next U.S. President. Trump's election is causing people to react in very divergent ways.

Christians are disciples of Jesus; we're called "disciples" because we're supposed to share common disciplines, structures of action and faith that unite us. Jesus calls us to listen to his disarming call and to practice disciplines to help heal divisions. Here's six disciplines that may help:

1.
Christians listen first of all to Jesus' call to confess. We are not perfect. We don't know everything in matters religious, intellectual, political. We all react to situations based sometimes on our survival instinct instead of the call to give glory to God and love God and neighbor as ourselves. As the hymn we just sung ("In the Midst of New

Dimensions") reminds us, we all get caught up in our own 'self-seeking schemes.' We draw our swords against one another much more easily when we deceive ourselves into believing that we have a corner on the truth and the right, when we assume that God must always be on our side. In Christian faith, though, we try to have faith that in fact only God is totally on God's side, everybody else is struggling to get there. In any given moment, people of one particular stripe may be right about an issue, or may be wrong. But Jesus calls his disciples to not self-righteously assume that they are justified to take up arms against those who arrest him.

Christians on this day confess their sin, their limited perspective, their pride and ask God for forgiveness. When we listen to Jesus' call, we remain open through humility to possibilities that God may be acting through others in addition to ourselves, that if our candidate wins, that doesn't make us right, and if our candidate loses, that doesn't automatically mean we must rectify some sort of cosmic wrong.

2.
Christians listen to Jesus' call to the discipline of confessing their sin.
Christians also listen to Jesus' call to confess Christ as Lord.

Jesus calls his disciples to stand down on that Maundy Thursday in part because his arrest, trial, crucifixion and death will lead to the Resurrection.

Especially this week, we should all remember that Jesus Christ is our Lord, none other. At a time when we may feel happy, discouraged, or apathetic toward politics, our faith reveals to us that no person, party, or -ism can take the place of the one who reigns with God our Creator and

the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Our mortal leaders will always disappoint us especially if we assume they can save us from what we fear most.

The hymn we just sung poses the question: “Who will lead the pilgrim peoples, wandering in their separate ways?” The answer: “God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar.”

The good news is that Christ does not disappoint us, that despite the tumult we may have experienced that led up to this election, or the fear we may have now for the future, God is with us through Jesus Christ and his kingdom transcends this human kingdom. If we have felt abandoned by our country because of the policies and economy in the past, God has not abandoned us; if we feel abandoned by our nation in a moment of shocking defeat for our candidate; God has not abandoned us. If we have or now question the essence of our citizenship in these United States, there is still no question that God extends to us citizenship in the kingdom of God’s people.

If we have put our absolute trust in Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Jill Stein or Gary Johnson (who as we already established are, like each of us, fallen human beings); if we have placed our absolute trust in the democratic process or the church, which are both constituted by fallen human beings, then we are sorely mistaken. Human leaders are provisional, not our saviors and hopefully not our doom, if they do not start a nuclear war.

Jesus says, Put down your swords of placing too much hope upon mortals.

3.

But Christians also listen to Jesus’ call to challenge those in power.

Jesus didn’t want his disciples to pick a fight with the soldiers, it’s true, but that doesn’t mean there is no resistance in the story or in following Jesus.

Jesus through his peaceful arrest and poised testimony to the Jewish establishment and Roman occupiers exposed their thirst for power and their use of violence to get what they want. Jesus challenges the power in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets to spoke truth to power in love. In the Old Testament, Moses and Samuel, Elijah and Isaiah and Amos revealed to the kings what they experienced as the conscience of God. They called rulers out for exploiting their power and neglecting the most vulnerable. They predicted what the future would look like if the rulers did not follow God’s commands of justice and righteousness in order to move the powerful to remember God and God’s promises.

128 million Americans offered their portions to our shared American prophecy. A chunk of the electorate felt that voting for Trump was a challenge to business as usual in Washington. That challenge now becomes administration. And those who disagree with what comes in the coming years have right to express themselves peacefully. The amazing thing about our country is that we get to choose who rules and who speaks in challenge, and these roles switch because of the wonder of democracy.

Some of the good news for today is that even in the midst of new administrations, God grants us voices to make our leaders at all levels accountable to us, prophets in our 240-year-old democratic experiment. Even if we are cynical that we matter these days, we can look to the movements of the Exodus, the Civil Rights movement and gay rights movement to know that resistance and a shared vision can move mountains and sway leaders. God calls us to put down our swords but lift up our voices in peaceful resistance.

4.

Christian disciples listen to Jesus’ call to honor covenant.

As Jesus is being arrested, he does point out how

we had been teaching among them in the temple as one of their own. "I am not a crook," Jesus tells them, "I am one of you, a Hebrew." He has just shared his Last Supper with his disciples, saying, "this is...the blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:28). Jesus gives himself to bind all who follow him and all humanity as one family. That bond is what enabled our Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors to make their way here almost 400 years ago, making compacts or covenants to rely on God and each other despite the perilous conditions that laid in front of them.

This week, when the preparations for the transition of power began at the White House, we can all assume that President Obama wasn't happy, but he shared with the press in regards to the situation, "We are actually all on one team." In saying so through gritted teeth he wasn't just honoring the U.S. Constitution, he was honoring as best he could the Christian faith he had deepened at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago; faith that we are all in this together and act that way whenever possible. When we follow Jesus, we love our enemies, we turn the other cheek, because God's bond to us all is stronger than human resentment. Obama welcomed the person who spread the false rumor that he was an African-born Muslim. Obama welcomed him with grace, because he is committed to Christian covenant.

Jesus says put down your swords and recognize your covenant bond to the other.

5.

Disciples listen to God's call to care for one another.

Jesus had his disciples put down their swords in love for them. 'For those who live by the sword die by the sword.' He wants them to live another day. At the Last Supper that had just finished, Jesus said to those same disciples, 'I give you this new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'

Jesus loves us too, and calls us to love one another in this world and nation. This election has exposed deep divisions among us—differences of ethnicity and race, education levels, religion and geography. I think the last years have exposed a nation of people who as humans yearn to be needed and loved.

So many Americans, some among us, trained and worked hard in substantial jobs, but many of those jobs moved away, evaporated or were cut. As the Dalai Lama wrote this past week, when people are no longer asked to do the jobs they love, we feel like they can't do our part. We feel unneeded. A number of young men with whom I graduated high school in Wisconsin worked at the local window factory, but those jobs have shriveled up and where does that leave them? Working two part-time retail jobs, with no job security or benefits, little economic hope and feeling unneeded.

Now that Trump has been elected many people are hopeful that the President-Elect cares about them, that his administration will work to bring back jobs and let them feel needed again.

But at the same time, because of the rhetoric that led to this week, there the LGBTQ community who are truly scared right now; some people of color are scared; our American sisters and brothers in the Muslim faith are scared; some women and minorities are scared. And those of us who stand with people in such situations are scared, too, with an uncertain future ahead of us.

And there are many children who don't understand the nuances of post-industrial economics, who don't know what the rust belt is, who can't weigh the merits of a smaller or larger government; they just know that the man who tweeted and said some disgusting things was voted to be our next president. If not scared they are at least very confused.

Will the people of this country care about each other? Will they be loved and needed?

God calls for us to love one another today. You can find love in your heart for the person who voted for someone else. You can accept their personhood, the spark within them that makes them your sister or brother in Christ.

You can put down your sword as a practice of love and care.

6.

So: Christians listen to Jesus' call to confess sin and to confess Christ,

Christians listen to Jesus' call to challenge one another;

Christians listen to Jesus' call to covenant and to care for one another.

And Christians listen. Period.

Christians engage in real conversation. God lifts up "the words of my mouth" and the hearing of our ears to be done with love and empathy.'

Our love for one another will only blossom if we sit down with people with different perspective or, perhaps better yet, do things together with others and reflect on those actions together from our different perspectives. That's part of the 'magic' of mission trips, that a rag-tag group of seemingly similar suburban kids who actually have some diversity among them, they work together and then have to talk about it together to. They put down their phones and they converse. They talk.

You may be headed to a relative's house for Thanksgiving or others may be headed to yours for the holiday. And you may be thinking, "Crud, I have to deal with so and so and their very different political views!" It's not always easy to hear those differing views, but can you get at the bottom of why they feel that way? What feelings are underneath their views? Maybe your democratic socialist nephew cares deeply about disabled and special needs kids. Maybe your

uncle has PTSD from being a Vietnam veteran and he feels the VA and his country have failed him. Maybe your sister-in-law resents strong-willed women or aggressive men because of something from her childhood. Whatever the stories, it's your sacred duty, it's our Christian discipline to listen to other's stories instead of staying in our private bubbles. Our faith may be personal but it's not private, it has to be shared and impacted by the stories of others.

So get yourself together before Thanksgiving, learn about how to avoid escalating anxiety in your conversations. I will put links to the basics of nonviolent communication (NVC) on the church website.

Thanksgiving dinner isn't just about surviving the holiday and talk isn't really as cheap as it seems. The disarming of our divisions and the healing of the nation might get jump-started one challenging, loving, humble, faithful conversation at a time.

So now I invite you to put down your newspapers and tablets and your smartphones. Put down your pre-conceived notions and any other spiritual swords you have drawn. The sun will rise tomorrow and God's Son calls us to crucial Christian disciplines for God's sake and the indivisibility of our country. Amen.