

FOLLOWING JESUS (AND LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS) IN A DIVIDED AMERICA

Happy July Fourth to you and to our country. This year feels even more special as we celebrate the 250th birthday of America.

At the Bicentennial Celebration in 1976, when we celebrated the 200th birthday of our country, there was a big festival at our high school football stadium in Little Cypress, just north of the Orange, Texas city limits.

Everyone was asked to dress up like their favorite American historical person. Adults and children participated in the parade of great historical characters around the football field. There was the Statue of Liberty, Betsy Ross, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln.

My brother participated in the parade around the field, but his particular American hero was hardly a hero at that time. From the back of a Mad Magazine, he had ordered a Richard Nixon mask. So there he was, slipping into the parade of great Americans as Tricky Dicky. Nixon, not quite the American hero...

Even with the disgrace of Watergate and the political fallout, I can remember that our country seemed to agree to move on, to move forward, united for better times ahead.

What does it mean to follow Jesus today, in a divided America, when we are not united, not moving forward to better times ahead?

We are divided. We want to win the latest political argument. We say, "The Republican party has been taken over by white Christian nationalists" or "The Democratic platform is inherently socialist."

Even if it is not so extremely divided, many of us are appalled by others' political opinions on abortion, immigration, race, guns and any number of other issues that divide us. A good faith question to ask is how might we talk and act caringly without sacrificing relationships with our family and friends?

We do not need airtight unimpeachable rhetoric. We do not need to win over Republicans or Democrats to our side. What we need is a total reorientation so that our ultimate goal is not winning an argument or even winning an election, but instead, bringing healing to a hurting world.

That is our mission, that is our purpose, that is how we love God, love others, serve. How do we bring the healing power of Jesus Christ to a suffering world?

This is not only the most effective path forward, but it is what it means to be Christlike. If Jesus' goal was to win people over to a political strategy, he failed miserably. If his goal was to bring democracy to the Middle East, mission not accomplished.

But if his goal was to bring healing and shalom to a world straining under the weight of empire, oppression, sickness, sadness and scarcity, he was the greatest leader the world has ever known. In that way, I believe we are invited to be like Christ. We are invited, specifically, to take up our cross.

I hope you can see that this is pointing to hundreds, if not thousands, of opportunities to care about the welfare of others. It is a scary proposition, because anything other than self-interest might involve sacrifice. It might involve pain or discomfort. If it were not for an earthy, practical theology of resurrection, it would be insanity. If life were limited to what

we amass here, we would be fools to not hoard and protect.

But if we die with Christ, as Paul's second letter to Timothy promises, we will live with Christ. The rhythm of death and resurrection is not a one- and-done ticket to heaven; it is the foundational motif of our lives and we must choose it over and over again.

Resurrection is not something that we hope for when we die. Resurrection happens daily. Resurrection is the only way we can die to political advantage, die to power and die to privilege and rise to mutuality, to compassion and to solidarity. Resurrection is the only way we can revive our dull hearts to Jesus like love.

What does death and resurrection look like? What does it mean to die to self-interest and rise in the context of our divisive political debates? Look to the Gospels. What kind of story would Jesus tell in response to people literally dying as they try to cross the border? Or to the gun lobby? Or to the starving?

The stories in the Gospels do speak to our current situation. I understand that they do not offer a political situation, but they affect our politics.

Mutuality is not some internalized decision to just love everybody and then retreat from the fray. Compassion drives us to act. Sometimes our solidarity is a vote. Sometimes it is getting involved in protest. Sometimes it is getting involved in aid work or organizing an outreach effort.

The great irony of modern American life is that radical compassion and connectedness would go much further to heal our divisions than any political messaging or movement ever could.

Jesus' life was a nonstop pursuit of suffering people, interrupted periodically with rebukes of others who were overly preoccupied with their in-group dynamics. He had to break social norms and religious rules and was ultimately crucified as a lawbreaker. All in pursuit of the people society would rather forget. The lepers, the sick, the poor, the unclean. He did not always play nice and he never set aside his mission to avoid conflict.

So, while I do not think there is a political solution to national disunity found in Jesus's life other than caring like Jesus cared and loving like Jesus loved, I do think there is moral clarity. The stories of the Gospels provide vignette after vignette of what the dying and rising motif could look like in our lives.

Here's how it looks: You were not made for the Sabbath (dying), but the Sabbath was made for you (rising.)

The Son of Man came not to be served (dying), but to serve (rising.)

You've got to lose your life (dying) in order to save it (rising.)

You must die to sin to be able to rise up to real life.

The Beatitudes. Peter walking on the water. Jesus calming the storm. The healing of the centurion's servant. Raising Lazaous. Even producing new wine at the wedding banquet. These stories point us to dying and rising. That means dying to having it our way and rising to something better.

So, please, do not prioritize all your political or nationalist answers ahead of your commitment to Christ. Being connected to Jesus is based in dying, even to willingly die to our shared national interest, for the sake of true unity and the shalom of all creation. You've got to die before you can rise.

We can play nice and look the other way, but such an approach to national unity is flawed.

What is our nation? Are we a melting pot? A city on a hill? A nation of law and order? A collection of immigrants? Tired, poor, huddled masses longing to breathe free?

At some point, the suffering engendered by the prevailing national imagination becomes irreconcilable. What is the solution, if not unity for unity's sake?

Again, hear me, politicians want us to believe that politics is about identity. But I stand here to today to remind you that your true identity is a child of God.

Until we see the whole of creation, including even our enemies, as unified with us as God's children, we will continue to suffer and continue to tolerate the suffering of others.

Our identity is in being a child of God and our unity is in Jesus Christ. Do more than pick a side. Our national division is much deeper than red versus blue. It cuts to our very souls.

In a comfortable, affluent suburban setting such as ours, how have we inured or maybe numbed ourselves to the suffering of others so that we will not have to bear the discomfort of compassion, especially if it might lead us to take on a little suffering of our own in order to alleviate the suffering of our neighbors?

We've fed ourselves a steady diet of counternarratives so that we are ready to fight, not heal. We've allowed ourselves to believe that these are political fights and that a win for our side is the best way to heal the country.

There are stories of this one man who was neither Democrat or Republican. It's not that he was too conservative for the Dems and too liberal for the Republicans. It was that he was not an American at all.

Jesus of Nazareth, as his stories are told in the Gospels, calls us to unity, to a oneness, to a compassion that is so antithetical to our partisan divisions that we should be blushing. Because his compassion is not based on ignoring the suffering that divides us. It is found in putting that suffering at the center. It is found not in pursuing pleasantness, but in dying to comfort so that we may rise to healing.

The oneness Jesus offers makes the imagination of the nation seem puny and petty until it serves the good of all.

In one of the greatest snippets of all of Scripture, a lawyer after receiving from Jesus confirmation that he rightly understood the law's demand to love "your neighbor as

yourself,” sought to justify himself by requesting a definition. “And who is my neighbor?” the lawyer snapped back at Jesus. He was asking, in effect, “Whom do I have to love?”

The lawyer pressed this question, we’re told, to justify his stinginess of heart. He grasped the seemingly impossible demands of the law of neighbor love, and he understood himself to be on the wrong side of the law unless that law could be shrunk down to size.

Loving is hard enough when it comes to family and friends. But loving my neighbor as myself? That’s only possible (if at all) with a cramped definition of “neighbor.” The next-door neighbor is fine. Even next-door neighbor on both sides. The backyard neighbor, too. But surely Jesus does not expect us to expand our definition of neighbor to include everyone.

Well, you know how this ends up. Jesus tells the lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan. Someone is hurt and they are ignored by all the people who are expected to show him mercy. Instead, the injured man is tended to by someone you’d least expect.

Don’t ask who your neighbors are, ask who you are? To love your neighbor is to love Jesus himself.