

NOVEMBER 6TH, 2016 – 10:30AM
SPRINGFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

THE CUP OF UNITY

I. IT BEGINS WITH A ROAD TRIP

This past week, I had the opportunity to drive up to my alma mater, Princeton Seminary, for a continuing education class on Preaching. En route to the conference, I stopped for some tea at a Starbucks on the way to New Jersey. And, as you see at the pulpit, I've brought my cup.

I find it a bit funny, but it seems that every year the Starbucks cup comes under some level of scrutiny. Last year, their simple red cup came under fire, with some folks claiming that it wasn't Christian enough, or that it was too politically correct. As I picked up my cup at Starbucks this time around, I was moved by the imagery. Now, I'm told the red cups will come back for Christmas time, but these cups were illustrated to express 'unity'.

These cups have also caused an uproar among the Starbucks customers. The CEO Howard Schultz said in a statement, "During a divisive time in our country, Starbucks wanted to create a symbol of unity as a reminder of our shared values, and the need to be good to one another." Some folks claim that the cups are some kind of political statement or are unattractive. But, as one of the cups is passed around the sanctuary, I want you to really take a look at it – one continuous line, people of all different shapes and sizes, outfits, haircuts, differences. I'd presume, if I were to read into the cup more as an art piece, that these people come from different cultures, and religions, and beliefs, yet this one continuous line pulls them all together. If that's not unity, I'm not sure what is.

Perhaps it seems odd that your minister is blethering on about a Starbucks cup, but it's deeper than that. It was refreshing, in such of time of disunity in this country and argumentation in election debates, to see something that points to unity in our culture. In a time where there's posters of Trump and Hilary and words exchanged are often rude or disparaging, a sign of unity in a cup was just the simple encouragement I was looking for this week.

II. The Church Sign and Thessalonians

The reality of the week is well summed up by our church sign that reads, “Jesus is coming soon – hopefully before the election!” It is again, one of those signs that we smirk and laugh at, but there’s some truth in our laughter too. I’ve been hearing during this election season more talk of the ‘end times’ than I usually hear.

This talk of the ‘end times’ was something that the Thessalonians were talking about too, in our lectionary reading for today. The Thessalonians were thinking that the end times were now, a very present reality in their day-to-day lives, but Paul tries to reroute their thinking. They are called to be on guard, to be ready, but to know that the day has not yet come and that they must stay steadfast in their faithfulness. For Paul, as he writes to his brothers and sisters in Christ, he encourages them to hold fast to their traditions and be comforted and strengthened in heart by Christ who is the ultimate King, the ultimate president, the ultimate head of the church and head of our hearts.

The Thessalonians were also anxious, and I’m not sure how you’re feeling about Tuesday, but I am too. Yet Paul asks the Thessalonians not to be shaken in mind or alarmed, but to be encouraged and again, comforted, for God is in control.

III. The donkey, the elephant, and the lamb

As I was sitting at a small table with pastors from different places, experiences, and cultures, I asked a very real question: “As a pastor, in a time of division and disunity, at a time of fear, at a time when we are electing our new president, how do I encourage my congregation? How do I not mix religion and politics, even though, in some ways, they are inseparable?” And, I’ll tell you, no one had the ‘ultimate’ answer on this one, but I will remember a line that a colleague from the Baptist ministry sitting next to me said, “We need to encourage folks not to vote for the donkey, or the elephant, but to vote for the Lamb.”

Now, my dear colleague, in my understanding, was not encouraging us all to go into the voting booth and write, ‘Jesus for President’ on the fill-in category. Yet, he was conveying

that at the end of the day, whoever you vote for, you need to remember that Christ the King and the Lamb of God is who you put first.

It was such a simple answer, and yet, such a profound one as well. When we vote from our heart and our minds, which are crafted and formed by the words of Scripture and the love of Jesus, we are voting correctly. Whether that's Hillary, whether that's Trump, whether that's a third party candidate – the 'who' you vote for needs to be based upon your conscience which God informs and crafts and creates fresh and anew as we learn from God's holy Scripture.

My colleague's words also pointed to another profound truth: no matter who is president, Christ is the King of all. For me, that lessens my anxiety just a bit as I walk into that voting booth. Folks, Christ's got this under control – that is what faith is about. No matter what Wednesday morning's election polls tell us, Christ is King yesterday, today, and forevermore. And the fact that Christ is King unites us as a people, no matter who we vote for or what comes next.

IV. Psalm 145

And this notion sets me right into a place of praise for God, just as we heard this morning in our Psalm. Psalm 145 is the only psalm that has the subscription 'of praise' and doesn't include lament. This Psalm truly reflects praise – it begins with praise and ends with praise, just as our lives should begin and end with praise of God, too.

Within the Psalm, there is also this sense of nearness to God. God is near all who call on Him, He fulfills the desires of those who fear Him, He hears His peoples cries and saves them. At the end of the psalm, we are told that we are called to proclaim that praise, the praise of a God who is near and who deserves our praise forever and ever. A God who is with all generations, through all time, never abandoning, never pulling away from His beloved children.

V. The Cup of Unity

I would like to draw your attention to words of a theologian, much wiser than myself, who was the founding father of Methodism. John Wesley, in 1774, spoke to those

who were in a position of voting, saying, “I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them, (1) to vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy, (2) to speak no evil of the person they voted against; and (3) to take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side.” Wesley’s words echo as loudly today as they did in 1774, so let these words of unity amid disunity strengthen us as we vote.

What I can promise is that the Lord is near, especially this week. That ballot curtain cannot divide you from the God who stands with you, beside you, through you, and envelopes you. For nothing can separate us from the love and nearness of God. And as we move into the space of communion, we remember the cup of unity. Not the Starbucks cup, but the real cup of unity, the one that we share when we gather at the table. We are people who, though created in the image of God, have different political values, different cultural backgrounds, different experiences that shape and form us. While all of these variables are important and integral to who we are, when we come to the table, we unite together to share the cup that symbolizes our unity. The unity that says that no matter who is a leader of a nation, God is our true King and true leader; it is a cup that symbolizes that while we may disagree in some ways, we share our common and sacred bond in Christ.

Let us share the feast together. Let us be united in Christ. May we praise God forevermore and know that Christ is for us, with us, and draws near to us, His beloved people. **Amen.**