

John 18:33-38

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters* again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'³⁴ Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'³⁵ Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?'³⁶ Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.'³⁷ Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'³⁸ Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'

John 19:8-9

8 Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever.⁹ He entered his headquarters* again and asked Jesus, 'Where are you from?' But Jesus gave him no answer.

Finding Grace in the Questions
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08-19-17

Last week something beautiful happened here in Dodgeville. Last week two churches of different denominations came together to worship and eat and share fellowship – and while it wasn't particularly unique, people left feeling fulfilled – fulfilled with word and sacrament, unity and faith – and Love.

That's what it's about isn't it? That's why we gather together to worship. We come for spiritual fulfillment and to tap into that mutual love, so that when we go home – we can relive that love, and be that love, and *spread* that love.

It's pretty common these days for churches to work together ecumenically. We have had to learn how to do this as more people abandon religion, and it's funny, because once you come together you wonder well why didn't we do this a long time ago?

Sure, there are doctrinal differences, but we didn't gather to discuss doctrine; we were there to worship, and love, and *be* loved by God, and each other, and that's something that just cannot be regulated through doctrine.

I think doctrine is something that must be held loosely anyway – because it changes, or develops as we change – as the world changes – as our understanding of the world changes. When you think about it, how we view our doctrine is largely a response to those changes. It is our opinion about how the church is to be in the midst of a changing world, and that is where our denominational differences come into play.

But those differences are not even limited to denominations. In the UCC, each local church is autonomous; there is no rigid formulation of doctrine; each church determines its own doctrine and practice. And sometimes, local churches disagree. And here in our own congregation – sometimes our opinions differ – which is why we vote on things that are really important.

Everywhere we go in life, we encounter opinions that differ from our own. And even our own personal beliefs change and contradict each other as *we* change and become more fully who we are.

Sometimes I will go back and look at old sermons I wrote, and I'll wonder, who the heck wrote that? And, what was she thinking? It wasn't that I was wrong when I wrote it; it was that I thought differently; I perceived the world differently; new ideas had presented themselves; new things had happened...

Opinions and ideas and beliefs are like sand that shifts every time the wind blows; we're constantly changing our mind and tweaking our perceptions; because we're constantly taking in new information.

But sometimes we get stuck in our opinions. Sometimes we close our eyes and ears to new information because we don't want to change our opinions. Sometimes it is hard to change our opinion because we feel like it's an admission of error – or we might think that the new information was sent to test our faith.

Pastor Jim and I actually hold many differing opinions. To the untrained eye it's really kind of a marvel how we are able to meet in the middle. But when we stood together and preached I knew that I could

trust *both* of us to bring a message of hope, love and unity to both congregations – which in that moment was one congregation before God.

We prepared. Twice we sat down at a table to discuss our sermon, and there were indeed differences of opinion. But it was for both of us an opportunity to receive new information. And sometimes that new information would change our opinions – other times not – but each time we differed on something we would pause and try to hear with the other was saying. We would ask questions to further clarify points we didn't understand – and we were always respectful.

Because we both understand that opinions are like shifting sand.

And we both understand that it isn't about our precious opinions anyway – it's about giving a message that will promote healing, goodwill, unity and love. It's about our love for God and our desire to see God's kingdom reveal itself in our midst. And that was exactly what happened.

But I have to confess that in the back of my mind there was an internal conflict going on. Because that service was the very next day after the big clash of opinions in Charlottesville, and things were weighing heavily on me. I wanted to preach about it.

Badly.

Because I was frustrated and angry about things – and I wanted my soapbox time.

Because Facebook told me that if I didn't preach about it, then my congregation should start looking for another church.

I wanted to preach about what happened in Charlottesville because that was what I was called to do. It was the perfect prophetic moment – but our outdoor service was not the time or place for a perfect prophetic moment – and Pastor Jim trusted me not to turn it into one.

I chose the title for this sermon at the beginning of the summer. It is number seven in our sermon series on the Brave New World of the 21st century church. And my intent was to focus on how questioning the things we have been taught to believe is actually a good path toward a deeper and richer understanding of our faith. And that's still where we're going ultimately.

I used the word "Grace" in the title because our understanding of it is so elusive, yet our experiences of it are so beautiful and pure and individual. Grace simply cannot be contained in one meaning because it shifts and changes to accommodate each situation where it is experienced.

Sometimes grace is all soft and whispery, bringing you to tears and you don't even know why. Other times it might come knocking on your door to bring you a casserole when you're sick. Grace might mean forgiveness, or a hug from a child, or the sudden "ah ha" moment just when you think your doubts are going to consume you. But the best form of grace – the *best* form of grace – is when it frustrates your attempts to say or do something you probably shouldn't.

And despite MANY opinions to the contrary from fellow clergy, preaching on Charlottesville last Sunday was not a good idea – not for me at least.

Racism is wrong.

White supremacy is wrong.

White privilege is real; and it's wrong.

Freedom of speech is precious, and it should be protected; but when it is inciting people to hate; when it's targeting certain groups of people and advocating for violence against them – it's wrong.

The bible tells me that and so does my conscience.

But *you* don't need me to tell you that. You already know it. If you didn't, you wouldn't keep coming back here. Because we *are* a welcoming and inclusive community that values the dignity of every single human being. And if you believe that racism, or white supremacy, or white privilege, or hatred, or violence is okay, you won't be very comfortable here.

So if you're here – you don't need me to tell you that these things are wrong. And anything else I might have to say about it, is just going to be my opinion. And if you're like me, you've had enough opinion coming at you to carry you through the next thousand years.

This whole past week has been a feeding frenzy of new information and opinions. And my own opinions have been all over the board. I'm weary and I'm frustrated just from all the static and noise. So I believe that it was grace that put a muzzle on me last Sunday.

In seminary I was taught that the most effective preachers are the ones who preach with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

That is based on something Karl Barth said which was: "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." Karl Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian. He was born in 1886, and he died in 1968.

In 1968, actual newspapers were how we stayed informed of what was going on in the world. Most big cities had two – in St. Louis we had the Post-Dispatch and the Globe Democrat. There were two because one leaned in one direction and one in the other, and supposedly that represented fair and balanced reporting. The papers came out daily, and we read them. Other than the nightly news on TV, that was how we got our news. We didn't even have cable; which meant no CNN, no MSNBC, and no FOX. And if something new happened, we had to wait until the next day to read about it – from one of two sources – the Post or the Globe.

So Karl Barth's suggestion to interpret the newspaper based on your bible would have been reasonable and manageable.

Today, the fine art of preaching with a bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other is dead –

As we like to say, "it's no longer sustainable."

Today we are bombarded by every single newspaper in the world every single minute of the day. A lot of us receive updates on our phones all day long – informing us of the latest outrage. And then if you go

on social media, you're blitzed by memes, blog posts, opinions, finger-shaking, arguing, and shaming – and in my world, most of that is coming from fellow clergy.

So, if you are like me, the last thing you want to hear when you come to worship – is more opinion.

I believe there is a time and place for prophetic preaching. But I do not believe that every single time something happens we are called to jump up on our soapboxes and call it out. The ancient prophets pointed to the injustices in their society, and there are still those who are called to be prophetic voices today. I am called to be a prophetic voice. But not every single time something happens.

We do need to talk about the issues of our times. We do need to study the issues and wrestle with them. And sometimes we need to share our opinions. But we also need to pause and try to hear what the other is saying. We need to ask questions to further clarify points we didn't understand – and we always need to be respectful.

Our world is changing. Our country is changing. Our sands are shifting. We have all of us been operating under an old set of assumptions that no longer serve, and it is time to start questioning the things we have been taught to believe if we are to have a deeper and richer understanding of what it means to follow Christ in this new world – this Brave New World.

For Christians, Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. That comes first, and it goes way ahead of prophetic speaking.

Following Christ is not our opinion – it is our destiny.

And that is Grace.

Amen