

Sermon: Tribal Text: Mark 8:31-38 September 12, 2021
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Some years ago I had the opportunity to visit the region from which my great, great, great grandparents came. In and around the 1840s, my great great great grandmother Lydia McClelland came to Peel County in Ontario from Ballieboro in County Cavan, Ireland with her husband Joseph Clifton. And the church that her family attended in County Cavan, a Presbyterian church, had an unusual architectural feature.

The region around Ballieboro, Ireland in the late 18th Century was home to the United Irishmen, These were Irish Protestants who were tired of English rule. They wanted to be free of the British monarchy and joined their Catholic neighbours in rebellion against the Crown. The pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Ballieboro would bring a broad sword into his pulpit on Sunday mornings and in his anti-monarchical fervor would slam the great blade on his podium while he preached. So the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church there, is hacked and marked by the preacher's great sword...

So there is an election coming soon. I passed by an early poll in the Church Hall on the way to the sanctuary this morning. And for some reason the story of the *sword marked pulpit* came to mind as our election day nears.

Maybe it's the intensity and passion of the Presbyterian preacher that seems familiar- almost contemporary.

In Canada, in the US, in much of the world things are pretty heated. We are polarized, divided... tribal even.

There seems like there is some anger out there. Politically outrageous memes flood social media, often filled with misinformation. Social media algorithms favor content that creates emotional reactions like anger and fear, stoking the fires of discontent in order to draw viewers so that advertising dollars may be made. The pandemic keeps us physically distant and has accelerated the trend towards digital communication. We will say things in digital text that we would not say, or would express differently, if we were able to be face to face.

Candidates of all parties speak of how their election signs are now torn down at unprecedented rates. Journalists are struck by stones hurled at a candidate in anger.

And it's not just that groups disagree. We are beginning to express contempt, not just for ideas we don't like, not just for political leaders we don't care for, but also for the people who hold disliked ideas, who belong to other parties and groups. So much political conversation descends into *ad hominem* attacks on party leaders, not into a discussion of policies and platforms.

Beyond politics we are divided on so many issues...like the pandemic. Masks, lockdowns, vaccinations...all have become things to divide us at a time when we really need to pull together.

Our societal reaction to the pandemic has been tribal. Doctors in the southern US provide vaccinations secretly, discreetly as people fear getting vaccinated as it is seen as a mark of disloyalty to the tribe.

George Orwell, in an essay he wrote at the end of the Second World War, spoke of the factionalism of his time as “the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests. . . . The abiding purpose of every group member is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.” This sounds contemporary too.

...Which brings us to our gospel for today...

Jesus is with his friends by the springs of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was the seat of Roman power in the north of Israel. Jesus spoke of a cross in a place where the empire’s power could be seen all around them.

A cross was an instrument of imperial power; Crucifixion was a form of Imperial execution. And Jesus says “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

First we can hear the words of Jesus as an invitation not an imposition. Any cross we carry is one we decide to pick up. It is not imposed on us. There are burdens that life places on us but those are not our crosses if we have not chosen them.

What is Jesus inviting us to choose in picking up a cross? He is inviting us to choose a community, an identity, a particular group of companions on the road of life. He is inviting us to join his tribe, his faction.

The people of Jesus time and place were what anthropologists call "dyadic," that is, they were "other-oriented" people who depended on others to provide them with a sense of who they were. Individual identity was not so important. Identity was found in relation to groups that one belonged to... Family, faith, place. The invitation of Jesus to take up a cross is an invitation to choose your group, to join with Jesus in identifying with those who bear crosses.

The cross was an instrument of power used by Rome only on non- citizens. A cross was carried by the outsider, someone outside the dominant tribe. And the act of carrying the cross was a public display of guilt and shame, a source of ridicule and scorn.

In saying that *he* would take up a cross, Jesus was telling his disciples whose side he was on. Jesus was with those seen as outsiders. Jesus walked in solidarity with people who do not belong in your group, Jesus was with those scorned and ridiculed. And he invites his followers to be with them too.

Joining Jesus tribe of the cross takes you beyond your tribe, your faction, your party...

Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." These words are an invitation into broad, compassionate community.

In 1958, while on a walk in Louisville KY, the monk and mystic Thomas Merton wrote this:

Yesterday, in Louisville, at the corner of 4th and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers....There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

Take Up your cross and follow me. Know then that they are mine and I theirs.

A feeling of connectedness, of being in a transcendent tribe that goes beyond our current faction, this has huge implications for how we treat each other. In his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* Canadian and Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker argues that humanity is becoming less violent and more humane. One of the reasons that he lists for this change is the human rights movement. When people of other race, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, abilities, faiths, political leanings...are seen as human beings, equal before the law...when divisions are erased, tribal identities set aside, we treat each other more kindly, more gently. When we see we are connected, good things result.

So as we go to the polls might we go as members of Jesus compassionate cross bearing tribe, following in the Way of Jesus, who embodied and lived compassion and grace towards all.

Can we see that, no matter how we might vote, that Justin Trudeau, Erin O'toole, Jagmit Singh, Maxime Bernier, Annamie Paul, Yves-François Blanchet, all candidates of all parties, whatever their perceived flaws as political leaders, are beloved of God. Connected. And people who we disagree with? They are God's beloved too.

So no broad swords slamming the pulpit today. But as we go to the polls in coming days might we see our connectedness, take up the way of the cross, be part of a transcendent tribe of compassion and love.

May it be so.