

## **Peace, Unity, and Us**

Psalm 103: 1-13, Romans 14: 1-11

“Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall.” Romans 14: 4

The Reverend Joanna Adams  
Morningside Presbyterian Church  
Atlanta, Georgia  
September 18, 2005

What makes a Christian? Some would maintain that to be Christian, at its most basic, means being baptized in Christ’s name. Others would say that a Christian is one who gives assent to a certain set of beliefs about the nature of God and the divinity of Christ. But since the beginning of the Movement, there has been more to being a Christian than baptism and belief. In the book of Acts, those who follow Jesus are called people of the Way. This is an indication that the “Christian life is a way of being in the world.” In his book *Testimony*, Tom Long talks about an island in the middle of Chesapeake Bay. Four hundred and fifty people live there. They’re descendents of fishermen. They fish and harvest oysters and crabs for a living. Smith Islanders also do the same things other people do. They eat and sleep and work and sing. Babies are born. People die, “but they do all of these things according to customs and patterns that, when woven together into a single fabric, mark them off as different. Smith Island isn’t just a place; it is a way of life.” (1)

To be a Christian, along with being baptized and making certain faith acclamations, is to follow the way of Christ. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes a certain kind of transformation of mind and character that is made possible, not by human effort but through the mercies of God, that puts us in the mode of being that distinguishes followers of Jesus Christ. This mode of being is characterized, more than anything else, by selfless love. “Agape,” it is called in Greek. It is seen in its purest form in the way God loves the world. Paul writes, “For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. God proves his love for us, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6, 8) Unconditional, selfless love: that is God’s way of being. It is the way of being to which we are called in the body of Christ.

Someone has said that there are really three kinds of love. The first is *because* kind of love. I love you because you are cute and darling or because you are sweet to me or because you do something nice for me. There is the kind of love that is called the *if* kind of love. I will love you if you are nice to me. I will love you if you are cute and darling. And then there is the third kind, the *anyhow* kind of love. I will love you anyhow, in any condition. You are mine, and I am yours. We belong to one another. This kind of love is not a warm and fuzzy feeling. It is an act of will.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, Paul lays out the marks of a true Christian, beginning with the most important mark, this selfless love: “Let love be genuine. . .love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another showing honor, owe no one anything except to love one another for whoever loves another has fulfilled all the law.”

These past three post-Katrina weeks have been filled with great loss and suffering for hundreds and thousands of people, but we have also seen great acts of selfless love. Over and over again, we have seen people love with a God-like kind of love. I was reminded of the words Anne Lamott wrote in her book *Traveling Mercies*, “The world is sometimes like a waiting room in an emergency ward. We must take the tenderest care of one another while we wait for the healer to come.”

Of course, love in its public form is justice. In the weeks and months ahead, action and advocacy from people of all faiths will be required to build the kind of nation and the kind of society that we long for as people of God, a society in which “justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream,” a society in which there are no second-class citizens, and the humanity dignity of all people is honored. We must not just talk the talk of our great American democracy and republic. We must respond to this crisis with changed social policies that emerge from the changed American public that has resolved never again to abandon the least, the lost and the left out. Public theologian Robert Franklin reminded our city last week of the current perilous state of our nation’s moral authority and of the need to move to higher ground. Dr. Franklin quoted the Jewish sage, Hillel, “The world is equally balanced between good and evil. Our next act will tip the scales.” (2)

I do not believe that the role of those who follow the way of Christ is to Christianize America. I believe our role is to help transform our society, to be “the light on the lamp stand,” to be the salt and the yeast, to make positive change. At the very least, we need to say “Wait a minute. No society that forgets the needs of the widows and the orphans will ever be a whole society.” Since the time of the Hebrew prophets, it has always been so, and still it is so. Our job is to dream of a just society in which those who live in poverty are not forgotten. Then, we have a responsibility to work to ensure that what we dream comes to pass in the here and now.

To live the way of Christ is to demonstrate a transformed set of values and a transformed way of treating one another. It is to this transformed way of living that I want to turn now. Both our society and our church have come to know serious division. As you sit here in this sanctuary, some of you are agreeing with what I have said and some of you are churning over what I have said. I do not have to tell you that the response to Katrina has evoked strong feelings on the part of the American people. What ought to have been done and what ought to be done now are matters of intense debate, but these matters are not all we disagree about. We disagree about abortion and gay marriage. We disagree about whether John Roberts should be confirmed as Chief Justice of the United States. We disagree with animosity and with distrust. Gone are the days after 9/11 when Republican and Democratic Senators and Congressmen gathered on the Capitol steps and sang “God Bless America” together. Not only do most people, now, feel strongly that they are right, whatever their position on an issue is, they also feel as if those who disagree with them are not only wrong, but are to be judged with contempt. This is not a good way for our society to go forward.

I call our attention to Paul’s letter to the Romans today because it lifts up a higher and more excellent way for our nation. The other reason I turn to Romans is that our beloved Presbyterian Church is at a point of serious division and distrust, the culmination of thirty years of wrangling over Biblical authority and homosexuality and other attendant issues. This ecclesiastical impasse in our denomination puts me in mind of the 17<sup>th</sup> century observer of the church who said, “I had rather see coming toward me a whole regiment with drawn swords than one lone Calvinist who is convinced that he is doing the will of God.”

A task force was appointed by three of our former Presbyterian moderators four years ago to study the state of the peace, unity, and purity of our denomination. Their report is done and is now before the broader church to be studied before the gathering of the General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama, in the summer of 2006. I have written my own personal response to this important study. It was published in *The Presbyterian Outlook* this week, and I will ask Aaron Bertrand to put it on our website, along with a link to the excellent report itself, which is, by the way, 1,545 lines in length and well worth our time and study. From the bottom of my heart, I commend it to you. I commend the committee's deep and abiding passion for the unity of the church. I pledge myself to work for civility and fairness and a rejection of bitterness in the church. I believe that God created the one body of Christ and that every time we choose up sides and decide we can no longer live with one another, we break God's heart. But I also will continue to work with as much energy as I can for the day when all whom God calls to ordained service will be constitutionally permitted to answer that call, regardless of sexual orientation. There are moments when the heart and mind will simply not let one let go of the vision of a church in which all who are baptized are treated with the respect they deserve in the household of God.

I was convicted by the confession in the report of the tendency of the members of the committee to assign blame to other committee members for the troubles the church was in. We all have a tendency to dismiss those with whom we disagree as somehow being less worthy than we are. No matter how important the substance of the disagreement is, we simply can never do that in the body of Christ, because it is not Christ's way. Jesus Christ walked this earth humbly and challenged authority when it conflicted with the values of the kingdom, but he lived his whole life loving his neighbors and even his enemies as much as he loved himself. He was not mean even to Pontius Pilate! Meanness has no place in the body of Christ.

The church conflict in Rome was basically between two camps: those who thought it was alright to eat certain foods and those who thought it was wrong. These were ritualistic matters important to Jews and Gentiles in the First Century, A.D. The important thing to make note of is this: each faction absolutized its own understanding of what was unacceptable to God, and in so doing,

concluded that the people who disagreed with them were themselves unacceptable to God. We cannot go there and still claim the name of Christian. Paul asks, “Who are you to pass judgment? It is before your own Lord that all of you will stand or fall.” Respect, forbearance, civility: these must be the operative principles for those who follow the way of Christ, for they are the byproducts of agape love.

I read a story this week about two shopkeepers who were rivals with one another and were always trying to put the other out of business. One night, an angel from God appeared to one of the shopkeepers and said, “The Lord has sent me to you. I’m going to grant you one wish, no matter how extravagant. There is only one catch: whatever you receive, your rival shopkeeper will receive twofold. What, then, is your wish?”

“My wish,” the shopkeeper answered, “is that you would strike me blind in one eye.” (3)

If that kind of spirit ever takes over the church, the church becomes entirely useless to the purposes of God.

One of the most wonderful novels written in many years is a book entitled *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson. It is made up of reflections of a man named John Ames, an Iowa preacher, the son of an Iowa preacher, and the grandson of a minister who was a young man in Maine and had a vision of Christ in chains and had moved out to the Midwest to Kansas to work for abolition in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. John Ames is seventy-six years old. He has a heart condition and knows he is at the end of his life. He wants to leave an account of himself and his ministry for his son who was born late in his life. Throughout his ministry, Pastor Ames has especially cherished baptizing infants: “...that feeling of a baby’s brow against the palm of your hand. Oh, how I have loved this life.” For him, to be a person of the Way has been to accept the complexity and imperfection of all human characters but to look at them constantly in the light of God’s love. That’s Christ’s way: to understand the brokenness but to look always at other people in the light of God’s love.

This is an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him: When you encounter another person, when you have any dealings with another person at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must

think, “What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation?” If you confront insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, as it were, “This is an emissary sent from the Lord and some benefit is intended for me, first of all the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some smallest degree participate in the grace that saved me,” you are free to act otherwise than as the circumstances would seem to dictate. You are free to act by your own lights. You are freed at the same time of the impulse to hate or resent that person. He would probably laugh at the thought that the Lord sent him to you for your benefit (and his), but that is the perfection of the disguise, his own ignorance of it. (4)

Friends in Christ, let us work for justice with all our hearts, but never let us despise those who see things differently from the way we see them. After all, nothing can save **any** of us except the amazing grace of God revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(1) Long, Thomas G., *Testimony*, Jossey-Bass, 2004, p. 16.

(2) *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 9/17/05.

(3) L. Gregory Jones, *Practicing our Faith*, Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 36.

(4) Robinson, Marilynne, *Gilead*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.