

There is just nothing quite like a primary election to get the disgust flowing. Now, if by chance you believe you have discerned my politics and do not share them, you may relax. That is not the direction I'm going. It probably won't ever be the direction I go. While I'm quite certain that God cares deeply about what our government does or does not do, I am nowhere near certain enough of my own ideas about the answers to the problems of government to confuse my opinions with the Word of the Living God.

So, with that disclaimer, let me share with you that I learned this past week of a new discipline that I didn't know existed, "disgustology". A "disgustologist" measures the capacity for disgust that our culture appears to be nurturing.

Indeed, in an editorial in *The Week*, William Falk laid out a road map for character assassination that each of the presidential candidates might use to attack and tear down their opponents. I am resisting the urge to share it with you. There were lots of words we've heard – socialist, vulture capitalist, influence peddler – there was something in it to offend everyone. After laying out what the attack ads would feature, the last line of the paragraph read, "Cue the ominous music and sinister photos."<sup>1</sup>

We have heard and will hear a lot of ad hominem attacks.

That seems to be one of the common critiques of our political process, that regardless of how principled and honorable a politician may be, pretty much anyone can be turned into anything by someone who wishes to caricature them.

It seems to me an altogether odd thing, from our vantage point, where we would do just about anything to avoid being seen as being "all things to all people," that Paul would seem to brag about it.

While he says he's not boasting, after reading about how Paul was a Jew to the Jews, an outsider for the outsiders, weak for the weak, I found myself wondering, "Paul, were you a politician or a pastor?"

Personally, I can't be all things to all people. There are just some things I'm not good at. I freely admit it.

My brother once sat on a jury where the plaintiffs were represented by their pastor. Admittedly, the stakes

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<sup>1</sup> Falk, William. Editorial in *The Week*, Feb. 3, 2012, p3.

are a little lower when you're the plaintiff, but if you're ever the defendant, please don't ask me to represent you. You'll wind up in jail and I'll feel bad about it. We'll have to form a prison ministry, which we probably should have anyway... it's just best not to chance it. I'm not a lawyer. I can't be all things to all people.

But here's Paul, almost appearing to brag about it.

That Corinthian church was a mess. Corinth itself was something of a cosmopolitan place. It used to be popular to point to Corinth much like Vegas, a sort of place where what happened in Corinth stayed in Corinth. It was a city famous for catering to the world's oldest profession and various other hospitality industries. It was a melting pot of different sorts of people and they didn't always get along, as is often the case when you get folks together who don't understand one another and don't agree with one another. And the church that Paul had founded there in Corinth was behaving exactly like the city where they lived.

There are at least four different disputes that were going on within the church that Paul wrote to them to mediate. How it must have hurt his heart to see the congregation that he founded and loved fighting amongst themselves. In a city fraught with enough strife already, what a disappointment to find it in church.

Paul fired off this angry missive from which we read this morning, positing, "Look folks, I met you exactly where you were. To the Jews, I was a Jew, to the gentiles, I was a gentile, to the poor, I was poor. I met you all exactly where you were so that you could know who Jesus is, and now you're acting like a big old bunch of horses' rear-ends. You can do better, you should do better, and I'm holding you to it."

The intensity of that last part gets lost a little in translation.

Paul is capable of elegant theology, but we see that elsewhere. Here, in this moment, he's mad as a hornet at them and it shows.

Why would anyone want to come to church if the Christians that one encounters don't show the least bit of evidence that the faith claims they make have had some impact on their lives? In the middle of a city of factionalism and fractured relations, Paul lays out for the Corinthian Christians a clear expectation that the manner of their lives should offer a redemptive word to the community.

Now, where have we seen fractured relationships and factionalization?

Hmmmm... I hear Georgia might be considered a battleground state this year. It certainly will be where nominations are concerned. Do you think that our community, our culture is perhaps a bit fractured?

Just so we're clear, Morningside Church is not a fractured community. We are not one of the congregations that are at war with themselves over our theological differences. Whatever theological differences may exist within Morningside – and there are differences - we have resolved them in a way that we are in community with each other. But our larger church, our denomination... that's an entirely different story.

Parenthetically, to make a long story somewhat shorter, theological differences between congregations are drifting toward becoming ecclesial differences. What we believe about certain matters is in danger of pulling the church apart. It would be easy to reduce it to the matter of ordination standards and whether or not the Presbyterian church is going to include its gay and lesbian members fully or not, a matter long ago resolved at Morningside.

But it is not that simple.

There are very real divisions within the church about what we believe on a number of matters. There is a very real possibility that some prominent and not so prominent Presbyterian churches will leave the denomination. I hope it will not sound too dismissive when I say that I am really pretty unconcerned about that. It's not that I don't care. I do care. But I care a great deal more that we fulfill the mission of the church than I do about the future of the PCUSA.

If we are to have a word to speak to a fractured and factionalized world, it must come from a church that is living as though its faith in Jesus Christ has made some discernable impact on how we live our common life together. Close parenthesis.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians and told them to start acting like they loved one another. Indeed that wonderful hymn to love that we hear read at probably fifty percent of weddings came about because Paul was so concerned that a community at war with itself needed to know what love looked like. It's not a passage for weddings, thought it's certainly good for that. It's a passage for divorce court! Paul knew that

the answer to the forces that would pull society apart is a church that has a word to speak about the love that God has for the world. But first, they had to get their own house right.

If you're disgusted with the tone of political discourse in our country, it is because we have been getting primed for disgust for a very long time. If you're disgusted with really, pretty much anything that's going on, it's because we've been immersing ourselves in and indulging ourselves with ways of thinking that are destructive to the core. And that is no way to live.

It is not enough to avoid the negativity. I have absolutely no illusions about the efficacy of my standing here preaching and saying, "now, y'all be sweet to people and think nice thoughts and turn the channel when the attack ads start and turn off the radio whenever the words, "those people" or any cognate thereof are uttered." As persuasive as I might be, as earnest as you might be, we are awash in a sea of tribalism and partisanship. Just resisting it alone will have a short shelf life.

We need an alternative vision. We need a vision shaped in the love that Paul wrote about: the love of Jesus Christ lived. We need a sacramental lens through which to view the world.

What do I mean? I mean separation is sin and community is sacrament.

I mean, in Jesus Christ, we are each members of the other.

When we understand that, when we live that, then *being* is *communion*.

I love a line out of Wendell Berry's *Manifesto, The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*. It is a word for everybody: "Be joyful, though you have considered the facts."

The whole poem is a series of subversive acts designed to redeem life, to rescue it from the degradation that it could become, the splitting off of individuals to the detriment of the community until we become nothing more than a bunch of individuals with no sense whatsoever of what it means to be together. When it comes to the end, the last words are, *practice resurrection*.

It's not enough to avoid unpleasantness. Our calling, the calling of the church is to practice resurrection, to put ourselves in between the unpleasant poles.

Do you know the problem with putting ourselves between unpleasant poles? It means you get bullets from both sides. And we're called to do it with no more armor than the love of Jesus Christ.

We are called to practice resurrection, to look at life through a sacramental lens so that we see things as God sees them. We are called to be joyful, even though we have considered the facts.

Joy is pretty countercultural these days, you know? There was an ad campaign that I saw last year that suggested that buying a BMW would lead to joy. They've since returned to being the ultimate driving machine and I have a hunch that they figured out that selling joy was a non-starter.

You don't buy joy. You live joy. Joy is the direct result of practicing resurrection.

When we practice resurrection, not avoiding that which is unpleasant but standing up to it by looking at the world through a sacramental lens, seeking the sacred in one another rather than finding the profane, then we live in the love of Jesus Christ, and that is counter to all the destructive, degrading ways that we're told to look at people and think about people.

Fred Craddock tells the wonderful story of train ride that he was on back during the days of the cold war, back when we were just sure that the Russians were the enemies and that they were out to get us and blow up the world in the process. He was on a crowded train and he asked an old German woman if the seat next to her was taken. Despite some language challenges, they struck up a conversation. It turned out that she was from Rostach, which was in those days behind the iron curtain. That's in Communist Germany, the DDR, he observed. "Are you a communist?" He asked.

"No," she replied, "I am a Christian."

They spent some time talking about being a Christian in Germany and being one in America. The time grew long and Craddock grew hungry, so he broke his sandwich in half in order to share it with her. He said he hadn't noticed that while he was breaking his sandwich in half, she was peeling an orange and she handed him half of it. He was just sure, he said, that they had communion right there on that train.

Later on when he was preaching at a church in Springfield, Missouri, he remembered that meal and how it had left him feeling and he began wondering just how far it was from Springfield, Missouri, to Rostach, Germany. He wrote,

“I thought about her so much that I got to thinking about how far it is from Springfield, Missouri to Rostach, Germany. Do you have any idea how far that is, how many hundreds, how many thousands of miles it is. From Springfield to Rostach. Do you know how far it is? I checked the atlas. It’s across that table. That’s how far it is.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s the surest way to shorten the distance between the unpleasant poles, to come to the table. And then leave. Leave and be joyful, even though you’ve considered the facts. Leave and be joyful, and practice resurrection.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Craddock, Fred. Craddock Stories. Graves and Ward, eds. St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001. P58