

**The Only Thing, Pt. 3: The Law of Christ**  
**Nov. 13, 2016**  
**Caldwell Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. John Cleghorn**

*Psalm 46*

*Galatians 6:1-2, 7-10*

Well, it has been a long, long week. Last Tuesday seems like 2 months ago. We have been leaning toward Sunday ever since then, leaning, yearning for a word from the Lord and the chance to be in the company of believers.

We should always, always remind ourselves that, no matter what, we have each other. It's my blessing to sit at the intersection of all of your lives. One of the perks is hearing your stories and learning all about your lives. This week, for instance, I learned that Marilyn Marks was a pilot in her younger years.

She told me the story this week of one of her test flights when she lived in South Carolina. She was looking for one landing strip but she could see two from the vantage point of her pilot's seat. The only trouble was she was unsure which was which.

She picked up the microphone and called into the tower of one of the two. It happened to be a military base. She remembers her exact words as if it were yesterday.

"This is 4326 Delta Charlie. I am temporarily disoriented somewhere over Greenville and requesting assistance."

We know from her presence here that Marilyn was not shot down over that military base and she lived to tell the tale. I told her my new nickname for her is Amelia Earheart, another fierce and independent woman.

Our reactions to the stunning outcome of Tuesday left us with many different reactions. Being "temporarily disoriented and in need of assistance" tells it pretty well. But there are other reactions. One of you told me you felt as if a close friend had died. As for my house, well, there was no shortage of tears.

Today we conclude our look at Galatians, and, again, we find how this 2,000 year old letter speaks to our current lives and circumstances with remarkable clarity.

The region of Galatia where this letter's original readers lived was a thriving intersection of many peoples and cultures. Not surprisingly, that intersection held its own deep divisions and disagreements.

In those two ways alone, Galatia mirrored the America we know this November of 2016.

But Paul kept the faith – in God, yes, but also in people.

In fact, in response to their disagreements, Paul offered the earliest extensive writing on what it means to be a Christian. That is the Letter to the Galatians.

To review, we began with Paul's astounding claim that we can balance both unity and diversity when our primary identity is, in these powerful two words, "in Christ."

In Christ, he wrote in chapter 3, "there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female," for all are one.

In Chapter 5, Paul added, "the only thing is faith working through love." He calls his readers to stand for freedom for all of God's people and to keep the yoke of oppression from the necks of the vulnerable.

Those things define in part what it is to make up an alternative community, one that stands apart from the world in all seasons, whoever was emperor in Paul's days and whoever occupies the White House in ours.

In Chapter 6 of Galatians, Paul brings it all home. He has painted a vivid portrait of what an identity "in Christ" looks like. His closing words focus on bringing healing, creating harmony where disharmony had ruled in the hearts of the believers in that early church, and where it may rule in the hearts of our nation today.

The central claim of this letter is that the old Hebraic law – that exhaustive list of rules handed down to Moses centuries earlier – no longer served as the one definition of faith in God. God's activity in Christ has redefined the faith. So, rather than the Old Testament law, Paul wrote, we now have what he termed "the law of Christ." "The law of Christ."

Paul goes on to offer three hallmarks of the Christian life. And in these days when so many are so justly concerned with how the law in America may be used in our newly elected and profoundly one-sided federal government it is the law of Christ that we must look to above all.

First, in verse 2, Paul writes that those in Christ are to "bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

In Christ, God bears our burdens. In Christ, God works across labels and lines of division. Christ ate with sinners and outcasts. The same Christ ministered to the rich and the powerful. In Christ, God met each person as they were, where they were.

But Christ never left them there. He left some he encountered disturbed and off balance, whether it was the woman caught in adultery or the wealthy Nicodemus. He left others healed – the man born blind, for instance, or the boy with a demon - and still others comforted, including his friend, the worrier named Martha.

Then Christ bore all of our burdens, all of our sins, on the cross, removing the stain of sin and the sting of death forever.

The law of Christ still asks us in our day how we can we bear one another's burdens? How can we live more empathetically with those who are different? How can we open our hearts and minds to the experience of the other, especially those who are the most vulnerable?

Yesterday members of Caldwell and St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church gathered to share their feelings, fears and prayer after Tuesday's elections. A wide, wide range of perspectives came to listen and to speak.

We heard words like "betrayal" and "despair" and "dismay." We did our best to wrap our heads and hearts around the state of our union and we looked to our faith. We tried to understand each other's burdens even more deeply – so that we might bear them, even those who voted differently.

The second hallmark of the law of Christ, Paul says, is that we are to tend to our own housekeeping. We are to be accountable for our lives, our actions, our words and deeds and even our unspoken thoughts.

Paul writes: "All must test their own work; then, that work, rather than their neighbors work, will become cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads."

Again, we might want to say to Paul this week. "Come on. Let us point the finger. Let us label and dismiss those with whom we don't agree. Those "others" who got us in this mess."

How many of us have been tempted to get into it this week at the office or on Facebook? How many of us can only see the splinters in others' eyes rather than the logs in our own?

Here the law of Christ asks a lot of us indeed. I don't think Paul is saying we should keep from telling the truth in love when we disagree. Real loves makes room for that.

But there is a fine line between truth telling and name calling, isn't there? There is a fine line between speaking up for justice and clothing ourselves warmly and comfortably in self-righteousness.

We are called to walk that fine line. I know in my own life, I sometimes lose that balance and fall on the wrong side of that line. Other times, I feel as though I am the one who has been stepped on.

How do we keep that balance?

Perhaps Paul gives us an answer in the third principal of the Law of Christ in Galatians when remind us what it means to be people of the Holy Spirit.

To be in the Spirit is not to engage in idolatry or hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.

To be in the Spirit, rather, IS to show love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Ten years ago this autumn a gunman entered an Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. He killed five young girls and severely wounded five more innocents. Do you remember how the Amish reacted?

On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "We must not think evil of this man." Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God."

The remarkable grace, mercy and forgiveness the Amish showed took the breath away from our nation. We heard the same breath-taking forgiveness from family members of those killed at the Mother Emanuel church in Charleston two years ago. Surely those folks felt anger and betrayal. Yet they called on the Holy Spirit and showed the world the gifts of the spirit.

Once again, friends, here me clearly. I am not saying this is a time for passivity. It is not a time to bury our anger or deny our sense of betrayal. We must remain vigilant, especially as we hear stories about those who are emboldened by the election to return to hate and prejudice. We must remain watchful.

At the same time, we hear Paul's wise words in today's reading:

"Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit." (6:7-8)

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On Wednesday, we awoke to a nation we may not have recognized. We may have felt "temporarily disoriented and in need of assistance." Or, even today, we may still feel woefully, profoundly lost in America. Ours may be the desperate prayer for God's assurance that we heard today in Psalm 46.

We do not know what will happen with our nation and its laws and policies. The truth is that while our president-elect has shown us his character, we do not really know his politics beyond vague, populist slogans. We pray our system of checks and balances will serve all Americans.

Meantime, we are given the law of Christ as a guide for what it means to be Christian more than Democrat, Republican or Independent.

And, again, obedience to that law requires a careful balance.

On one hand, we must recommit to the fight for justice, equity and equality for all. We must stand up to any who would say there is only one way to be an American.

Paul fought the same fight in Galatians in relation to the gospel. He opposed circumcision or any other single ethnic, cultural or physical litmus test for the faith. When Peter refused to eat with uncircumcised Gentile believers, Paul took him to task for practicing an exclusionary faith. In the same way, we must be on watch against any who would say there is only one way to be an American, whether that one way is white and evangelical or some other claimed identity.

At the very same time, we are called to be bridge builders and peace makers. We must stand guard against the divisive nature of labels and generalizations for how they can dehumanize and belittle others of opposing views.

As prone as we may be to lash out at those of differing opinions in these high-stakes days, we must guard against the fruits of the flesh - idolatry hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.

So where does the church fit alongside government?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote this about the church and worldly powers and principalities.

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state and never its tool . . . . But if the church will free itself from the shackles of deadening status quo, . . . . it will rekindle the imagination of (humankind) and fire the souls of (all), imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice and peace.

So, sisters and brothers, to claim the true gospel, to proclaim the law of not one political party or another – but of the Law of Christ – is to believe, truly believe, in the miraculous claim that Christ can create unity amid diversity.

That there is “no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female,” for all are one in Christ.

And as Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians:

“Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.”

Amen