

Signs of the End – Luke 21:5-19 – November 13, 2016

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I have been thinking a lot about what I wanted to say to you today. Today is Commitment Sunday, where we ask, if you have not already done so, to turn in your pledge card so that we know we can keep the doors open, pay the heating bill and to fund our numerous ministries in the coming year. At 6:45 this morning, as I was sitting in my office staring at a blank computer screen, I still wondered what I was going to say to you today.

The annual budget campaign is very important, so don't think I am letting you off the hook! But I also felt like I needed to put into words my perspective on our current events. Now we all have feelings about what happened on Tuesday. How could we not? The election impacts every person in this room. And I think it is safe to say, no matter how you voted, who you voted for, or who you voted against, we were and are surprised by the outcome. Even the professional pollsters got it wrong.

I don't want to talk about the election. There are plenty of articles and blogs and interviews and news stories from people who know more about politics and the political system than I do. What I want to talk about is the division in our country.

Our country is more diverse now than at any time in its short history. And our country has made great strides in ensuring that the basic rights of equality are available to and attainable by all people regardless of skin color, gender, sexual orientation, income, or religion. As a nation, we still have a long way to go, but we're getting there.

But the problem with diversity is this – diversity encourages differences.

I know. Shocking, isn't it.

But that isn't all. I've said this before. We don't like differences. And we don't know how to deal with differences very well. Diversity leads to discomfort. We don't know what to say or how to act around people who are different, so we tend to hang around people like us. We like what is familiar. We dislike what is not. When faced with diversity, we begin to categorize people into "us and them." But guess what, they do the same thing. Multiply that by all the diversity we have in our country, and you can easily see why it's such a big mess. People react to differences with fear, loathing, and sometimes violence. The different sides want to move on, and they can't understand why the other sides just can't get over it. As individuals, we may feel weak and powerless to make the changes we want, and so we look to our institutions. But our institutions are just as flawed and weak as we are.

In our passage from Luke's gospel, Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple. To the Jews, the Temple represented much more than merely a place of worship. It was the center of who they were as a people and as a nation. Their religious and national identities were

tightly interwoven. Whereas Jerusalem was their ultimate city, the Temple in Jerusalem represented the center of worship for the entire nation. But in this passage Jesus warned his followers about false prophets who would try to lead them astray.

When Luke's gospel was written, the destruction of the Temple had already occurred. In 66 A.D., an insurrection begun by the Zealots led to 4 years of war with Rome. The outcome was brutal. Rome besieged the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in the year 70. This is a grave example of the false prophets that Jesus had warned against in this and other texts. Believing they could stand up to Rome, they were slaughtered in the process. In the Book of Acts Luke records instances of three other false prophets who encouraged rebellion, and those who followed them paid a heavy price.

False prophets, or people who seem to think they have all the answers, are common in our generation, both secular and religious. Some false prophets proclaim a prosperity gospel - that if you believe you'll get rich. Some false prophets promote secular materialism, as if the stock market and all sorts of get rich schemes were the answer to everything. Then there is the hedonistic philosophy - the party lifestyle proclaims, if it feels good, do it. There are the health gurus, promoting whatever brand of fad diet or fitness program seems popular at the time. Other leaders want to blame our ills on a group or groups of people, and if we just get rid of them, our troubles will go away. The world is looking for answers, and people seem willing to hop aboard any available bandwagon that comes along.

Times of uncertainty can cause us to act in strange ways. Rumors fly about and sometimes we grasp onto anything that sounds halfway reasonable. Jesus told his hearers that there would be wars and insurrections. There would be natural disasters and signs in the heavens. He did not say there would be more of these types of things; he just said that they would occur. But his point was, this is the world in which we live. Bad things happen. But when they do, don't panic and don't buy into the rhetoric of the false prophets.

Jesus warned the people in the temple that day, that terrible things would occur. But he told them to not be terrified. Being a follower of Jesus does not make us exempt from experiencing the horrible things that occur in our world, but we have been given the spiritual resources to handle these times when they come. And they will come. It is how we respond to these times of struggle that tell where our true faith lies. Do we rely on our institutions or our leaders to save the day, or is our focus on the things of God?

When I look at the divisiveness that is occurring in our country, I am disheartened, and I wonder if we will ever get to a point where everyone can get along with one another? A naïve thought, maybe, but wouldn't it be great if we could just call a "do-over?" Or if someone would just come on the scene that could fix everything so everyone was happy. But I know it's much more complicated than that. And I know that the answer to our current ills will not

be solved easily or quickly. But I do know that the answer lies in Christ. In his example, in his love.

Our country is divided. This isn't the first time in our history, and it probably won't be the last. The very institutions that promised to deliver life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness have fallen short. Perhaps we had put too much stock in their ability to succeed. The divisions in our country run deep. They have existed for a long time, but as those who have been previously silenced begin to find their voices, the divisions are being revealed. There are many in our nation who have suffered injustice, discrimination, abuse, and marginalization.

This week's election didn't cause our problems. It has merely exposed the plague of disunity and discord that exists in our nation. The election has however caused some people to act in negative ways. Those actions have resulted in hurt, anger, fear, and violence. There are those who feel powerless and afraid to speak out. There are those who are experiencing discrimination for the first time in their lives. There are those who are worried for the safety of themselves and their families.

Throughout the biblical witness, God's stance has been to stand with the poor, the weak and the marginalized. That has always been the calling for God's people as well. We don't have to agree in our politics, but we can't let our politics define us. It is our identity in Jesus Christ that instructs and informs us in how we are to deal with others. And for Christians, love is the only answer.

The leaders and institutions of this world want us to believe in their easy answers to solve difficult problems. Christ tells us the things of the kingdom of God, those things that pertain to matters of eternity, are all that is needed. When we seek Christ as our guide we will find the endurance to stand against fear, against anger and against violence, and to stand up for love.