

Good morning. I would like to start my sermon today by naming one of the elephants in the room that we as preachers, and I really think all of us are facing with great difficulty whenever we try to communicate today, which is the fact that it has become almost impossible to say anything that hasn't been politicized in our culture. It's important to name those elephants in the room because doing so can clear the space to be able to communicate more effectively. And it reminds me of the old joke. I bought my friend an elephant for her room. She said, "Thanks." And I said, "Don't mention it." So yes. Things have become highly politicized. And I think we should just name it.

I was interviewed by a church in 2011 who said they didn't want politics in their sermons. I said I was fine with that, but I wanted to know what they considered to be politics. I was told, "Well, of course you could preach about poverty or racism. Those aren't political issues, those are gospel issues." And I think about that conversation and wonder now, and I'm sure many of you like me are afraid to say something for fear of being misconstrued or having it turned into a political or a partisan statement. And that itself is tiring. I hope that our words and our sermons can be heard instead through the lens of scripture, not as partisanship or as politics, despite the challenge we are in.

Secondly, I know that I need some good news. I bet you do too. I actually installed a new ringtone on my phone that sings, "I could use some good news." And I'm looking for good news in our lesson today from Romans. Saint Paul writes, "Do not let sin exercise dominion over you since you are not under law, but under grace. So now present yourselves members as slaves to righteousness." Righteousness. So he's saying we're not to be slaves under the dominion of sin. We're to be committed to righteousness. We cannot allow our freedoms to be justification to continue to sin or to participate in its dominion. Salvation by grace actually places a higher calling on us because we answer to God, not humans.

And so we're under this call of righteousness. The word for righteousness in the Greek means virtue and justice. And it denotes correctness in both actions and thoughts. So yes, my friends, we are in a tough place right now and we need some good news. It's hard for all of us in our society in this pandemic and the social upheaval we're experiencing, I know I feel worn out and maybe you do too. Our spirits groan with the Psalm appointed for today that says, "How long, oh Lord, how long?" So where is this good news in Paul's words? I hear him calling us to break the chains that enslave us under the dominion of sin.

The dominion of sin is opposed to the kingdom of God on every level. And the dominion of sin is many things, but it's always incredibly divisive. Now this is not the necessary divide that we make between good and evil. No, this is the false divide. The divide that happens when we're made into enemies with one another who must choose between false dichotomies. And this division is coming from people on all sides of every issue. No one is singled out here regardless of where we find ourselves on any particular issue. But in this divisive atmosphere, there's no sense of unity as the body of Christ or as people of God.

The church and the culture are fractured and there's no sense of we, as Father Mark mentioned. He mentioned to us the importance of we and of unity at the very end of his sermon last week. And I'm picking up where he left off on that thought. Because it's there that I believe we can find some good news. But it takes a little digging. Divisive politics and false dichotomies cause us to get stuck into hateful and warring camps in which we become totally unable to work together to be one body, to love our neighbors as ourselves, or to find workable and common sense solutions together.

Division is not merely holding different views. Division leads to fractured relationships and ultimately can lead to hate. And this divisiveness that has plagued our nation and history, including the church is demonic. Let me explain what I mean. The word devil itself comes from a Greek word,

Diabolos, which means the one who divides. Dia means across, bolos means who throws. So the devil is the one who throws apart or across, who divides, ruptures connections, creates chasms, and breaks down relationships between people as well as God. This is though where we'll find some good news in the scripture because the church is not only called to stand against this, but has the power to do so.

Just as the letter to Ephesians describes, we do this by the girding of truth, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the sword of the spirit, the helmet of salvation, and the breastplate of righteousness. There it is, again. Jesus, in our gospel reading today says whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous. Righteousness, my friends, we have the antidote to what ails us spiritually in the midst of all this division, fighting, and upheaval. The question is, will we use it? Because the spirit of division reigns all over right now and we see it's work every time we watch TV or log into Facebook or read the news.

Even here in La Jolla, we just saw a mural calling for unity and diversity being defaced and spray painted. We read of a little girl's artwork in her yard calling for peace, diversity, and an end to racism being ripped up by her angry La Jolla neighbor right in front of her mom. In our nation, people are fighting over the pandemic response, the tearing down of statues, the role of police, and the proper response to racism. Even more chillingly, we see additional violence against people of color, including multiple black men that have been found hanging from trees in recent weeks. And then people fight about whether they are suicides or lynchings.

Now, you know I could go on with these examples, but let me pause. Even though we're tired, sad, angry, and fearful, there is good news. We have such an important role, church. We have something to offer our world. And in order to offer this gift, we must rise above even the subtle ways that the spirit of division does its dirty work by

creating false dichotomies for us to just fall into. So let's name those. It's like the false dichotomy that pits all lives matter and blue lives matter against black lives matter when of course, we can support and value people of all races as well as the police, as well as black Americans all at the same time.

The spirit of division is halted when we see police officers all around our country who bent their knees in solidarity with the BLM protestors, as well as protestors, like the group of black men in Louisville who shielded police officers from the crowd with their own bodies. We can stand against the spirit of division and stand for righteousness. Or like the false dichotomy that has been created in describing calls for reform and an end to police brutality and the excessive use of force as anti-police. When of course, many in law enforcement themselves are seeking change and condemning such practices and many reformers express deep gratitude for the sacrifices made by those in law enforcement yet don't condone violence.

We can stand against the spirit of division and stand for righteousness. There is the false dichotomy that pits the health and survival of vulnerable Americans in this pandemic, against legitimate concerns for the economy and the unemployed in our country when of course, we can be in favor of both the health of our people, as well as our economy. We can stand against the spirit of division and stand for righteousness. We can break free from these divisive shackles and embrace God's spirit of love and solidarity, and God will help us. And we need to hear more good news of God's power enabling people to stand together and work for righteousness.

It looks like one of my clergy friends who shortly after his ordination was offered an interview for a number of pastor positions, but he and several other candidates learned that no female clergy had been offered any interviews. Those men together agreed they would all refuse an interview until some women were also offered interviews. We can stand against the spirit of division and work for righteousness. And it looks like the young Christian

Marine from Wisconsin who exemplifies the famous quote, "I do not agree with what you say, but I'll defend to the death, your right to say it," who was featured in our sacred ground film, American Creed. She explained that when she sees protesters at the state Capitol, she thinks good, I put my uniform on to protect their right even when I disagree. "That's service," she said, "People are exercising their freedom of speech, my job is done." We can stand against the spirit of division and work for righteousness.

And it looks like the life of one of our episcopal heroes, Johnathan Myrick Daniels, the young white episcopal seminarian who took a bullet and was killed in 1965, saving the life of a black girl named Ruby Sales. Daniels shows us what's standing against the spirit for the course of righteousness looks like when he wrote honestly about an encounter he had with a young police officer during a civil rights protest. He was face to face with the officer and they exchanged heated words when suddenly Daniels recognized the hypocrisy of his own heart. Daniels apologized to the young policeman and thanked him. And eventually they shared a cigarette together. Daniels found his heart melted by the love of Jesus for both the oppressed, as well as for the police officer he sought to correct. These miracles happen every day. They can happen for us too, for you and for me, because God in Christ has given us this amazing gift to break free from the dominion of sin with the breastplate of righteousness as members of the body of Christ.

This example is ours to share with the world. The spirit of division can be defeated with God's help. And so as we prepare to celebrate the 4th of July on Saturday, let's join and stand together against the spirit of division in all its forms and name it for what it is, and then work for righteousness in our nation that needs our witness more than ever. We can stand together for righteousness here and now my friends, and that is good news. Amen.