

January 24, 2021

"Inauguration Thoughts"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 9:33-41

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Well, now we have a new leader in the White House, Joseph Robinette Biden Jr, the 46th president of the United States. How did he get there? Well, more than 159 million votes were cast in the recent general election. More votes than any other time in our country's history. And Mr. Biden won the popular vote, garnering over 51% of those votes to Mr. Trump's 47%. But in truth, it was really a lot closer than that. Because just a combined total of only 44,000 votes in the states of Georgia, Arizona and Wisconsin determined the electoral college victory for Mr. Biden. Forty-four thousand votes. That represents less than three one-hundredths of one percent of all the voters who cast ballots. So what this shows me is that we're pretty evenly divided. But it also shows just how divided we are as a nation. Our political philosophies have literally become polar opposites. Effectively half the population thinks one way, and the other half, think the exact opposite. And the bottom line comes down to this: half of us are happy Mr. Biden won, and half of us are not.

Yet, I think, there is a hope and expectation that comes with any new presidency. The hope and expectation that somehow political differences can be put aside, or at least there can be compromise, so that things will change – in a good way. And we as a nation will be brought along in that goodness, moving toward a more unified front. In his Inaugural Address, President Biden actually pledged to be a president for all Americans, those supporting him and those who did not, promising to unite our people and unite our nation. And as much as this makes me feel encouraged, I also wonder. For something tells me that politics will still rear its ugly head, and the news will eventually continue to read the same, and the anger and divisiveness we've been seeing over the past years will remain. That pessimism I feel is captured in the lyrics from an old Eagles song I just happened to hear as I was thinking about this week's sermon. It goes, "You see it your way, and I see it mine, but we both see it slipping away." That's what I wonder – are those ideals we want to see in ourselves as a people, and in our leaders - things like trust and integrity and honesty and common sense and service for a greater good... are they slowly slipping away? Well, that gets to the point of my sermon today. Which is – nothing will change until, and unless, we change. Let me repeat that. Nothing will change until, and unless, we change.

And so, here we are now, with just such an opportunity, a chance for a new beginning with change for the good. But can we change? Well, isn't that the message God continually promises us, not just us as

citizens of this great country, but all of humanity? The common theme of the Bible in general, and the promise of the good news of Jesus Christ specifically, is that God offers us second chances, again and again and again. New opportunities to claim the love of our great God, new opportunities to share and express that love in the world, and, especially, new opportunities to discover who we are and who we can become through Jesus Christ. Imagine that, new opportunities to discover who we are and who we can become through Jesus Christ.

And that's what today's gospel passage is teaching us. You see there are actually two wonderful lessons here. One is about our pridefulness, and the other is about tolerance and understanding. Both are something we need to deal with in today's culture. And it's something Jesus had to deal with in his culture too. I'm sure you'll be able to see the parallels I'll be making. Let's look at the first lesson. Jesus and his disciples have arrived in Capernaum. But there's something wrong. The disciples had been arguing among themselves. Can you believe it? The disciples acting just like us. They were arguing among themselves, arguing, in fact, as to who was the greatest. I wonder specifically as to what they were arguing about since St. Mark doesn't say. Greatest in what? Greatest in understanding and tolerance, greatest in love of their neighbor, greatest in keeping an open mind and being open to change? No, I suspect none of those things or else Jesus wouldn't be admonishing them. I think the argument probably occurred over things having to do with prideful nature. Perhaps being overly critical of others, perhaps not being open to another's thoughts or ideas or feelings, perhaps being narrow minded, perhaps putting the things of this world first, or perhaps at times... just being a jerk.

Now I think we all understand that the desire to be great is deeply ingrained in the human condition. So, we have a tendency to weigh everything in terms of whether it promotes us or it diminishes us. And we find this to be especially true in regards to our political affiliations. Where one side is smarter, better and more caring. This kind of thinking colors every situation, colors our opinions, our decisions. And in the previous chapter of Mark, Jesus warns his disciples that this kind of thinking actually undercuts the work of his kingdom. He tells them specifically not to be like the politicians and rulers of the day. "Watch out! Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and King Herod." So what is Jesus' answer to all this? Well, he uses the example of a child. Why? Well, children by definition are not prideful. They do not delude themselves in thinking that they know all the answers. They are acutely aware that they are dependent on someone greater. And so Jesus tells his disciples, "Anyone who wants to be first, to be great, must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." As I mentioned in a recent 'Thought

For The Day', the problems this country faces are not political, but spiritual. People feel unloved, unheard, disrespected. Or, they feel ashamed, lost and lonely. And these are problems that no political party is ever going to solve. Only God can do that. And so God works through his church – through you and me, as servants, to be righteous examples and to reach out and affect people in order to change their hearts and lives. This is where our priorities should lie, and not in any political party. As Christians we need to remember that our future and our salvation lie not in any human ruler, but in the ruler of rulers, the King of Kings, the One who will ultimately judge us. We have to remember that even though the occupant of the White House is changing, the One who occupies the throne of heaven will never change.

Now the second lesson from today's gospel is about tolerance and understanding, and it's one that almost seems almost counterintuitive. *"Whoever is not against us is for us."* Whoever is not against us is for us. What's that all about? Isn't it one side or the other? Well, back in Jesus' time this teaching might also have been considered countercultural, since people were so defined by their interest group. For example, there were Jews and Samaritans who hated each other even though they both worshipped the very same God. There were Pharisees and Sadducees who loathed each other even though they were both leaders and teachers of Jewish law. There were supporters of King Herod who despised the Romans even though they both governed the same people. And the Romans, well they disregarded everyone. And so the things that defined who was with you and who was against you became narrower and narrower. Basically, there were no allowances made for any differences. If you disagreed it meant you didn't love God, you didn't love your country, you didn't love your fellow man. Each group believed if you weren't for them, then you were against them. And none of these separations were casual. They were vicious. People wouldn't even associate with one another. In this respect, things during Jesus' time were a whole lot like what is happening today between Republicans and Democrats.

And, apparently, this wrong kind of thinking even held true for the disciples as well. Because when they saw someone, not of their group, invoking Jesus' name and performing a miracle, they tried to stop him, and they denounced that person. What's worse, they didn't even consider the good he may have accomplished. And so, once again, Jesus has to set the disciples straight. The defining characteristics of a follower of mine, Jesus says, are not exclusive. Value is not placed on the things that divide us, rather, value is given to anyone who meets the needs of the world in my name. That is what matters. *Anyone who is not against me is for me.* Jesus' definition of a follower is generous. It is steeped in an

abundance of grace. If the disciples don't understand this, they are bound to stumble and cause others to stumble as well.¹

And the same holds true for us because this is a whole lot like today's America. People are increasingly being defined by their political interest groups or socio-economic status. If you're rich, you must be arrogant or selfish or uncaring. If you're white, you're probably a racist. If you're black, your life doesn't matter. If you're a Republican, you don't care about social issues. If you're a Democrat there's probably not one thing Trump accomplished in his last four years as president that has been important or worthy. I could go on, but I'm sure you get my point. In today's America it seems we apparently put a value on those things that divide us, rather than what can unite us. And yet here is Jesus telling us we must not think this way. In the same manner God's grace is given to us through his love and mercy and understanding, we are meant to extend that same grace to others - all others.

As I said at the beginning, nothing will change until, and unless, we change. Until we acknowledge who we are and who we can become through Jesus Christ. We are blessed to live in this great country, a land of freedom. But with it comes one important responsibility. And that's best expressed by St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians. "You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! You could end up destroying one another." And with those final words, Amen!

¹ Whoever Is Not Against Us Is For Us, Barkley Thompson