

This past Friday, we remembered the tragedy that took nearly 3000 lives on September 11, 2001. At the time, I was working in my first job out of college at the Watertown Daily Times. I was interviewing the County Legislature Chair about an escalating contract dispute, between the county and the sheriff's deputies, who had declared an impasse, when I heard commotion behind me, as reporters gathered around our TV.

The newsroom had only a 13-inch television on top of a supply cabinet, from which we usually only watched the local news. An AP-wire report alerted my co-workers of the first crash. I hung up the phone and went to the TV, just in time to see live the second plane crash into the towers at 9:03 am.

Immediately, everything changed – suddenly that impasse was no longer my lead story. Every reporter was immediately focused on one thing – how to report on this tragic event. At the time, we were an afternoon newspaper, so we needed to act quickly. The first edition paper had a 9 a.m. deadline, but it wasn't printed until about 11. So, of course, that deadline was pushed back, some, but could not be by much. I ran back to the one reliable computer we had in the building with internet – 2001 was a very different time – and started searching for something, anything, as a lead. Every single one of the reporters, editors and staff, finished whatever we were working on and focused on this one thing, this one event.

I cannot remember what I wrote, what I wrote for any edition of the paper that morning. But I remember it might have been the most energy I've ever expended in a 3-hour stretch. When the second edition went to print at noon, four planes had crashed, two towers had collapsed, and there were still so many unanswered questions. We worked furiously in each of our beats with a single priority, to find and report how our community was affected by this event.

By the late afternoon, my colleagues and I eventually left the newsroom in a state of shock. Exhausted, yet filled with adrenaline from overwhelming uncertainty and an awareness that our whole world felt like it was about to change, and we had a front row seat. Before going home, three of us went to a church to sit in a pew, pray and talk. There we sat – me, a believer, with a spiritual-but-not-religious person, and an atheist –sitting together in our shock and in our grief, confused, turning to the only hope we had in that moment.

Looking back at that day, it is in our vocabulary as a nation to talk about our unity after 9/11. In 2000, the country felt divided after the very narrow margin of the presidential election. At the outset of our new millennium, we began to see the tension we still feel today. Now, we like to say, as I heard so eloquently said at Friday's ceremony, that after the events of that fateful day, we came together as a nation by setting aside our differences to become one.

While we were gathered in Heritage Park in Absecon to grieve that horrendous day, I heard a longing for that sense of oneness that seems so far away. But the truth (now, and after 9/11, and as we will see it was for Paul too) is that our differences are not what we need to set aside, in order to have unity within a community. Instead, we must align our priorities to unite. Only then will we find true reconciliation.

Again, differences and diversity do not cause division. It is our misplaced priorities that divide us. The unity we felt after 9/11 was not because we set aside our differences or our diversity. No, it was because we aligned our priorities to put the needs of each other first. This was not in spite of our differences, but because we saw our common humanity. It was because we named our common pain & wanted to find common ground. This message of priority is what Paul gives the Roman church in our reading, and it is the message we need in our church today, and if we get it right in our churches. If we get it right, then it will spread into the community around us and help to heal our suffering nation.

When we read the text today with purely modern eyes, it is easy to miss the gravity of the situation. The good news of Jesus reached the city of Rome quickly after his death and resurrection. In less than two decades, the heart of the empire had been touched by faith in Christ. Paul is writing to this city's churches close to 30 years after the resurrection, and we have every reason to believe that these churches are thriving, except that there is tension between two groups. Paul calls these groups the 'weak' and the 'strong,' but neither is a term of endearment from the apostle.

You see, the weak are a group, presumably made up of primarily Jewish believers in Jesus, who recognize that in him the God of Israel became human as their long-awaited Messiah. They have the longstanding status as believers in the One True God of Israel, but they don't eat meat at the city markets because it may have offered to idols, even if they don't know for sure. In their faithfulness to God and a continuation of their lifelong culture of keeping the law, they've chosen to eat only vegetables like the prophet Daniel did while in Babylon.

The strong are likely mostly Gentile converts from Rome's pagan religions and philosophies. They were welcomed by the Jewish believers and told they did not have to keep the law, and after the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from the city of Rome, these former pagans had to take over the reins of the church. The Jewish believers returned when Claudius died and Nero took over, but now the former pagans had all the power in the church. They saw keeping the law or Torah, which the Jewish believers did, as something that made you less Christian. Paul accuses them of judging and belittling the weak, using a word that means, 'to take from them nothing,' usually translated as to despise or ignore them. To Paul, this is a false strength. Indeed, the issues at hand here are not trivial decisions about meat or assorted holy days, but are at their root, concerns over religious freedom in the empire and in the church, matters of ethnic identity and the role of the old guard and newcomers in the church, and questions over what teachings decide if someone is *'in'* the community.

Today, as I look out on the church here in the United States, there is great division over politics. In my circle of friends, people are making bold claims on the upcoming elections. I will not label either as the 'weak' or the 'strong,' but the division is that intense. Indeed, even pastors and church leaders have made bold endorsements, coming down strongly for one candidate or the other, with the bold claim that their position is the rightful Christian one. They have said religious freedoms in the nation and in the church are at stake with our votes, and that the value of human life is too, from the unborn to those who are alive and denied

justice. Seemingly clear Christian points on behalf of either candidate are held up as absolute. The faith and character of candidates has been spoken of in certainties, and to choose one, or the other, is a litmus test for your 'true' Christianity. Political positions on individual issues are held up as paramount, as if support for one policy or another in all of government, is the breaking point for our Christian faith. With a heavy hand, they lobby for which Christian teachings are politically most important. The political policies and personas get trotted out as proof of God's presence in one party. The implication, of course, is that to defy a God-ordained person or party, is an act of grievous sin, a willful defiance of God's will for us and our world. They are saying: If you do not vote for *my* candidate, and if you do not vote for *my* party, the argument is then that you are voting against *my* God.

Talk like this can make us anxious about our votes, and make no mistake, that's the intention. Fear is a powerful motivator. If casting a ballot is made to feel like a grievous sin, then a person will choose to vote based on their fear and not wanting to commit a sin, or they'll defy that verdict of sin and vote on their own convictions, or they will choose to step out of the process, or worse, the church, entirely. Four years ago, I saw some people walk away from Church, because they defied expectations and felt judged for it.

Friends, I want to relieve your anxieties and tell you confidently based on God's own Word, that there is no clear-cut 'Christian' candidate, and there is no clear-cut 'Christian' party. Your calling to vote or not vote is according to your faithfulness to God. That's it.

This means that a faithful Christian might choose one party and one candidate, without sin, while another faithful Christian chooses the other party and candidate, without sin. Still another faithful Christian might choose not to vote at all, again without sin. But at the same time, each one of those options might very well also be sinful, because everything that is not done from out of faith in God, is sin.

This is what Paul tells us in today's scripture passage. This is what he says to a divided church in Rome. He does not take sides and choose a winner. He tells them what their priority should be – that if we live or we die, we are the Lord's, and all the same, Christ is the Lord over the living, and the dead.

Now, as we sit here mired in the weight of the decision we will make in this climate of division, it may be hard to imagine that Paul's little argument about eating meat or not eating meat could carry nearly as much weight as choosing the next leader of the free world. But I think what Paul is mediating is much more important. You see, the leader of the world, he gave a paragraph to in Chapter 13. He said that ultimately God allows for those rulers to rule. This applies whether the rulers are good or bad – Claudius wasn't good and his successor Nero was even worse. But that was the Emperor when Paul said it.

What matters more to Paul is how we govern ourselves in the midst of any ruler's reign, and to that, he devotes far more attention centered on this issue of eating meat. You see, Paul's concern is reconciliation in the church – its peace and unity in Christ. That peace and unity doesn't come from keeping the law or not keeping it, and it doesn't come from being the strong or the weak in the church. No, it comes from centering the priorities of the believers,

the individuals and leaders who make up that church. The priority must be on the person and work of Jesus and being transformed by the mind of Christ.

The mind of Christ shows us that reconciliation is not one party winning over the other. God did not choose to reconcile with humans by demanding we achieve God's standards. Instead, God chose to enter into our human existence and give of God's self, becoming a human being like you or me, except sinless, and dying on a cross, a cross used by the Roman Empire to silence opposition. But the cross could not and did not silence Jesus or his followers. No, Jesus rose from the grave conquering sin and death, paying our debt for us, to be an example to us also. We are called to live by a law of love, under a covenant of grace and mercy, to be a faithful community of truth, that changes the world, reconciling all things in it to Him.

Friends, we face a choice of two flawed human beings, and two flawed political parties. If we feel strongly that a fellow Christian isn't a follower of Christ if they don't agree with us, then we must ask ourselves as Paul asked, why do we judge our sister or brother? Why do we belittle or despise or ignore our sister or brother in Christ?

To be a Christian is to join the heavens and the earth in bowing and confessing with our tongue that Jesus Christ is the Lord God. He alone is the One we seek to follow as Lord of our life, knowing that we are going to make mistakes, but if we are acting in faith, there is grace and it is this grace that saves us.

A conservative Pastor said recently that God isn't a Republican or a Democrat, but an Independent. Namely, God is a 'Kingdom Independent' & we should be too, regardless of our registration. To vote, we may have to register in a party, but if we do, we should be Republican 'lite' or Democrat 'lite.' A more liberal pastor recently put it this way: *'I do not worship an elephant. I do not worship a donkey. I worship the lamb who was slain.'*

Our unity does not have to be in our practices, including our votes, but in a unity of our priorities, namely the God we say we worship.

Friends, after 9/11, we did not become people with one opinion absent of diversity or free thought, but we did become a people with one priority – the healing of our nation scarred by terror. In that way, we were, in fact, very truly united as a country in its aftermath. In the Roman Church, they were divided over how to interact with the world, and what practices demonstrated their faith and devotion. Again, Paul did not tell them how they should practice, but instead reminded them of who their Savior is and what their goal should be.

Friends, neither Donald Trump nor Joe Biden is or will be our savior of any kind in November. Take comfort in that truth and be comforted that the savior is not you or me either. Our votes or who we influence will not make us a savior. Your vote and opinion matters, but the fate of the world does not hinge on it. Examine your conscience and let go of the worldly motivations for your vote and hold on to the faithfulness that you have before the Lord. If you are split between your loyalties to the world and to God, then your vote may well be sinful, but remember that this too is forgivable.

Ultimately, take comfort in the fact that whatever happens, God allows or ordains our leaders, for better or for worse, and as hard as it seems to understand, God lets us make mistakes.

Jesus was born under Emperor Augustus, while Herod the Great was King of Judea, and Jesus was killed under Emperor Tiberius, at the hands of Pontius Pilate. God did not shy away from sharing in our human life under tyrants.

Now, this is not an appeal to some kind of Christian apathy, where we say, God is in control, nothing I do matters. The truth is that as Christians we must do more than vote for or against someone, or some party. We must hold the person we vote for accountable for where they do not measure up. Blind allegiance to one side or the other is not keeping Christ at the center. To keep Christ at the center is to prayerfully discern your decision vote, and in the places where the candidate you have chosen falls short, advocate for the issue you care about with time, talent and treasure. Do not place your candidate or party in the role of God, by offering undying allegiance and turning a blind eye.

Regardless of results, our responsibility is to govern ourselves by the law of loving God and neighbor, keeping our eyes turned toward Jesus alone, who in death or in life is the Lord of all. If Jesus is our priority then neither candidate nor party, not even our family or our nation, can hold the fixed place that belongs to God in our hearts – only the Holy Spirit can.

And if the Spirit is in our hearts, then the Father's Love is pouring in, and we must let that love then flow out toward our family and nation, and every neighbor, for all of us – friend and foe – are made in God's image.

As Christians, our goal should not be to prove we are right and win by judging others, but, as Paul said, *be* determined not to offend or be a stumbling block, a scandal, to others. Think of what it says to the nonbeliever to see Christians questioning each other, judging each other's faith based on American political candidates (as if politics in the United States would be God's litmus test for faith in the whole world). We must be reconciled in Christ to one another to reconcile the world.

As people of faith, our unity must be in the priority to which we place Christ in our lives. We must be consistent as we can be in word and deed to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom. This is our testimony of our faith and faithfulness that God will use to lead others to know God's love, as expressed in the person and work of Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed King. This is a high anxiety season, but do not let this anxiety over our elections destroy our priorities. I want to give you a friendly reminder: Jesus Christ is the Lord.

Jesus should be our priority. You are not the Lord. Neither is your political party, nor your political candidate. The issue you care about most cannot be Lord over your life. Only Jesus. Let us calm down and act according to our faith in Christ as Lord of our lives. Faithful Christians can be faithful Christians and still vote differently, as long as our priority is to reconcile this broken world to Christ, who is One with the Father and the Spirit, our God almighty, ordained to rule the true Kingdom, now in this world, and forever in the new creation yet to come. Amen.