

What does it mean to be a Christian, in this place and at this time? I know, that's an answer *I'm* supposed to give *you* in my sermon, right? Because figuring that out is part of why we come isn't it? We come of course to worship God, but also to be encouraged and instructed as we attempt, in response to God's grace, to live as Christ calls us to in the waters of baptism. And so we try to discern what that means, what that looks, sounds, smells, tastes and feels like, in the concrete circumstances of our daily lives. This past Aug that question was, for most if not all of us, undoubtedly operating in the background as we approached our primary elections.

Anyone watching TV certainly received a heaping plate of campaign ads to digest. They were of course intended to communicate, as is the purpose of all commercials. It is *what* many of them conveyed that I found disconcerting. In the last few years particularly, as candidates drum up support as they run for office, there has been a significant rise in advertisements of both the "anti" themed and attack varieties. All designed to cast disparaging shadows on their opponent, even if they're in the same party, in order to *eliminate* them, while giving the illusion that they alone stand in the light. Are these types of tactics what it means to be Christian?

In September 2013, grieving friends and family gathered at a makeshift memorial with stuffed animals and balloons. Twelve-year-old Rebecca had hurled herself off a tower above a concrete factory. After prolonged cyber and in person bullying with comments such as, "If you haven't killed yourself yet, would you please just die," the young girl texted a friend, saying, "I'm dead. I'm jumping. I can't take it anymore." Having been attacked by the girls who had been torturing her, even after reporting the issue to education officials, Tricia moved her daughter to another school and closed her FB account. Even then, though, the horrendous torment continued on other social media platforms. Is this sort of verbal exchange what it means to be Christian?

In this contemporary climate, it seems that, according to prevailing public voices at least, being Christian means being on the “correct” side of the partisan fence. It seems to mean instilling hostility and polarization. It seems to mean communicating to our younger generations that caustic language is the right way to live. It seems to mean pejoratively labeling people, aloud or in our own minds, as hippie or redneck or some such derisive tag. It seems to mean swiftly spewing words in anger without first listening. It seems to mean speaking and acting morally and intellectually superior to those we disagree with as well as those who are not Christian. It seems to mean lumping everyone into derogatory stereotypes, despite the fact that we are complex beings made in the image of the Creator. It seems to mean saying whatever we want, because Jesus is on *our* side. It seems to mean uniformity equals unity. It seems to mean obtaining and maintaining dominance. It seems to mean believing one way, while living, speaking, and acting another. It seems to mean loving only those who are like us. It seems to mean rushing to judge other, while not examining our own hearts.

“In fulfillment of God’s own purpose, the Lord gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of God’s creatures.” James and Mark wrote to faith communities who, like us, were trying to ascertain, “what does it mean to be a Christian in our context?” According to them, it means something else entirely. A woman by the name of Paula recently posted this on a church’s website: “I don’t really know how to start my story, but I was so overwhelmed that I was not able to ask for the family’s name that gave me the money while me and my son was waiting at Walmart today. I was standing and thinking about how am I going to have enough to pay my groceries since I’ve been trying so hard to stop using our credit cards. Then this family approached me and introduced themselves and handed me the envelope with money in it. I was in tears because it’s the first time somebody I don’t know gave me money. It is always me who tries to help other people, but nobody helps me but my mom. God really speaks to us, he reminded

me today that he will always provide. Always do good even though the people around you does not treat you well...This experience will always remind me about how good our God is and that we need to try our best to be good to our fellow human being. God bless your church!”

Recognizing God as the one who *gives us every perfect gift, everything* we have, Pr Bill, along with many others, is working tirelessly to improve and expand the food shelf so we can better care for and accompany the marginalized. Being quick to listen while slow to speak and slow to anger, Dr Anton Troyer from BSU leads diverse groups of community members through courageous conversations so that we can work towards true reconciliation with our Native neighbors. Turning from destructive behavior to make room for the implanted word, an addict works at her recovery. Rather than letting what is heard go in one ear and out the other, Delores faithfully tends to various family members as they have need. Examining her heart, Ila turns it over to Jesus, to be shaped by his radical, self-giving grace. And acknowledging Christ as the god who is so near to us whenever we call, we pray together in earnest.

As the gospel text from Mark reveals, Jesus sees clearly the darkness that lurks inside *all* of us, yet unlike the world, he does not turn away; he loves us still. Every second of every minute of every hour of every day. This good news not only bathes us in his unadulterated mercy, creating within us light, but it also exerts a claim on our lives, a call to follow. As James asserts, birthed by the Spirit, through the Redeemer, into new life in relationship with the Creator, we become, similar to the first fruits of a crop, signs of a greater harvest yet to come. Signs through which God communicates a wholly different message. One of love, repentance, forgiveness and transformation. Thanks be to God. Amen.