

THE WITNESS OF CHARLESTON
Independence Sunday, July 5, 2015 –Colossians 3: 1-14
The Church of the Covenant

It takes a lot of forgiveness to make the world turn. Without it, families break down; without it, churches break down; without it, nations fall apart. And the dream of ONE NATION UNDER GOD becomes splintered and impossible. Without Jesus there can be no forgiveness. When there is no forgiveness then we know HE is not present. If we cannot forgive then we are expressing to our world the witness that we do not believe we, ourselves, are forgiven.

Recently, people attended a Bible study in an historic African American Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Another person came to that Bible study and was included in the study and in the prayer time. But at one point he shot and killed nine of the participants in cold blood. The crime was beyond terrible and description. People were targeted because of their race. It was set in the context of a city where slave-holding and slave-selling had been considered legal at least up until the Civil War. In a way, therefore, the people in Charleston, and particularly the African-Americans, had every right to feel anger, betrayal, every sinful button of past hurts over slavery and discrimination could have been pushed and they could have reacted with anger and rage. And, as I say, in many ways, would have every right to do so. But this is not how they chose to respond. (And may I break into the center of this story just to say, for us all we will be subject to hurts and harmful acts committed against us, words spoken in secret that get back to us, people who ignore and disrespect us, people who refuse to listen, people who will believe the worst about us and work to make us wrong. But how the situation plays itself out is not that these things somehow magically will not occur in our life. Unfortunately, they will. How it will play out, whether for harm or for good, will be determined by how we respond).

The people of Charleston chose to respond by coming together, not splintering apart. The people of Charleston chose to pray together and worship together and march together, not hurl angry words at one another. The churches came together and the people of good faith came together. They had hoped that perhaps 3,000 people might gather, lock arms together, and march together in forgiveness. But in Charleston more than 10,000 showed up on the Ravenel Bridge to say anger and bitterness have “no place in our city”. There was the amazing moment caught on tape of various family members of the murdered Bible study attenders stating in front of the cameras how they forgave the shooter. I do not know if someone had shot my parents in a Bible study here at The Church of the Covenant that I could have been as forgiving. One said: “Its about hope, healing, love.” Another said: “Its about hope, forgiving one another and moving forward.” They could have responded in anger and indeed they had every right to do so. But instead they responded in forgiveness. And they responded with forgiveness because Jesus is still Lord in Charleston. There were enough people of faith and good will to stem the tide of anger and division. It is, may I say, THE WITNESS OF CHARLESTON.

Our scripture from Colossians bids us to “*set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*” (Colossians 3: 2) The focus of our heart and mind are to be on heavenly matters, not earthy ones. Set your minds on Christ and you have forgiveness, love and peace. Set your minds on this world and you have anger, strife and bitterness. “*But now put them all away*”, writes the Apostle. “*anger, wrath, malice, slander and foul talk from your mouth.*” (v. 8). We are to “*put off the old nature*” and “*put on the new nature which is being renewed (spiritually) in the image of its creator.*” (v. 10) Because the focus of this world are the divisions, as the Apostle says, of “*Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman...*” (v. 11) These are the divisions that arise when our focus is on the world and not on Christ. These little boxes to which the world assigns us result when we

focus on the world and ourselves and not on things that are above. And they result in anger, wrath, malice and slander, inflaming the divisions that the evil one so delights in. BUT CHRIST IS TO BE, as the Apostle writes, CHRIST IS ALL...AND CHRIST IS IN ALL. We can make it about HIM or we can make it about us. It is Jesus Christ who lives within our heart through faith; it is HE who has come to take up residency within, it is HE who is our life, He who transforms our old nature and transforms our old thinking into new; it is HE, when HE lives within our heart, our family, our church, our community, our nation and our world, who makes us ONE in HIM. But only when HE, Jesus Christ, is ALL AND IN ALL.

We are to take off the world from our heart and life and we are to, as it says, *"PUT ON CHRIST..."* And then it says, we are to be forbearing of one another, and *"if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive..."* (Colossians 3: 12-13)

Imagine how God must have felt at Calvary. He had sent His only begotten Son into the world because He so loved the world. But fallen sinful humanity took the Son of God and nailed Him to the cross. Our sin and fallenness nailed Him there; our sin was the nine inch nail driven into His hands; our sin was the spear thrust in the Savior's side. God had every right to be extraordinarily angry with us; in wrath to bring the world and all His creation to a close in an instant. But instead, God chose to forgive the world that HE had created and loved, forgive the world, forgive you and me, for nailing His Son to the cross. God had every right to be angry. Instead, He forgave, because His Son Jesus asked Him to. If one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. So how has the Lord forgiven us? So you also must forgive. It is the witness of God at Calvary and it is the WITNESS OF CHARLESTON.

Much is made of the need legally for the "separation of church and state". I find it unfortunate when even Christians site this as chapter and verse of the way things should be. No, I think on this Fourth of July Sunday, when we thank the Lord God Almighty for our freedoms, when we consider all of the reasons why we are a free people in a free land, I think we need to conclude that while for legal reasons there might be separation there must never be separation of church and state, Jesus from the nation, the Ten Commandments from the law, ON SPIRITUAL GROUNDS. We must never buy into the lie that we can ever hope to be one nation apart from Jesus. If there is no Jesus, there will be no forgiveness. And if there is no forgiveness the flames of division and hatred will be fanned. And if there is no Jesus and there is no forgiveness all that will be left will be anger and wrath, malice and slander, a hopelessly divided people incapable of governing themselves. We cannot be ONE NATION unless we are ONE NATION UNDER GOD. Haven't we learned that yet? Will there even be the possibility of a civil and civic life here without the Lord?

But the other way, "putting on Christ", seeking to live out of His forgiveness, putting on love not wrath, forgiving one another as the Lord has forgiven, so too you must forgive, setting our minds above and not setting our minds on the things of this earth, the other way I believe is THE WITNESS OF CHARLESTON.

Which way for you, America? Which way? And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*