

What does it mean to be a Christian in a time of great turmoil? Do our baptismal vows to respect the dignity of every human being go out the door when we disagree with another's choice at the ballot box? Do we trust that God is truly with us if we do not see a way forward that reflects our values? Questions abound and life feels, for some, overwhelming and deeply discouraging while for others, life feels joyful and hopeful at finally being heard and being recognized as having been left behind for far too long.

This week I talked with several of you and members of my own family and several people not members of this community. Some were jubilant at the election of Donald Trump and others were in tears. Calls to suicide hotlines have been up several-fold. Regardless of who you voted for, I am grateful that people did vote. I am grateful that people care enough to respond, whether pro or con the results. We will all see over the next several months and years what our new life in this country will be like. I suspect all of us will be surprised- both positively and negatively. I believe our democracy is strong enough to weather the uncertainties. What troubles me, though, is the apparent unleashing of views so diametrically opposed that civil conversations seem, at least for some, to be a thing of the past.

It almost feels, for some, like the apocalypse- and the eschaton or end times might really be right around the corner. That's scary. Paul, in writing to the Thessalonians, is addressing a community where some really believed the second coming of Jesus was going to happen soon. If not today, then tomorrow or the next day. Definitely in the short run. Therefore, there was no need to work in order to eat. There was no reason not to be idle because the end was coming so planning for the future was no longer relevant. As we sit here today, we know that the end times have not yet come. And they may not come in our lifetime. Therefore, Paul exhorts us, live as if the second coming is not imminent. Live a Christian life each and every day even when, and perhaps most especially when, the world around you is in turmoil.

William Barclay<sup>1</sup>, a Scottish pastor who died in 1978, presciently commented that we see “the inward and the outward characteristics of the Christian [in this passage]. The inward characteristic is the awareness of the love of God, the deep awareness that we cannot drift beyond [God's] care, the sense that the everlasting arms are underneath us.” He notes that Paul “was a realist... [and] Once again we see the tremendous responsibility of free will. We can use it to open our hearts and we can use it to shut them. Faith's appeal is not selective, it goes out to every [person]; but the heart of [a human] can refuse to respond.”

With respect to this passage helping us see the outward characteristics of a Christian, Barclay adds: “The outward characteristic is the endurance which Christ can give. ... The outward characteristic of the Christian is that when others break [the Christian] stands erect and when others collapse [the Christian] shoulders his burdens and goes on. With the love of God in [a Christian's] heart and the strength of Christ in his life a [Christian] can face anything.”

Paul also hated idleness and busybodies because they disrupted the community and violated norms of Christian behavior. Gossip can be destructive. It serves to tear down rather than to build up. Paul hoped that the community to which he wrote would regroup despite outward turmoil in

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<sup>1</sup> [www.studylight.org](http://www.studylight.org) William Barclay's Study Bible on 2 Thessalonians (Nov. 12, 2016).

their lives. He prayed that they would come together once again to live a Christian life based on the love of God for every person and the call to care for one another. At the same time, each person was called to contribute what he or she was able. Paul urges them to do their work quietly and to earn their own living rather than depending upon others to provide.

When work is done to promote the well-being and the dignity of every human being, and really of our whole earth, then we will not be weary. What we give away in love comes back to us many times over.

Trust in the Lord. Do not fear. Again and again we are told to trust and not to fear. As we move closer to Advent and then to Christmas, we will hear this message several times from God. We may not see the way forward but we can trust God that there is a way forward. We can trust God to be with us whether we grieve or whether we celebrate.

“Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid”, we read earlier in Canticle 9 which is a paraphrase of Isaiah 12. In this time of turmoil and uncertainty, we who profess the Christian faith of love and care for all, need to be even more vigilant and even more present as models of a community which is not afraid of questions and is willing to stay at the table with those with whom we disagree. If we cannot talk civilly to each other, we cannot change our world.

I encourage you to try something this next week. Carey Nieuwhof, a Canadian pastor, suggests that we can see this season as one of great opportunity for us to show how the church is different than other institutions.<sup>2</sup> Here’s one opportunity: Jonathan Haidt in his TED Talk<sup>3</sup> encourages us to seek out someone that you believe voted for a candidate different from the candidate you voted for. Suggest you have a cup of coffee. Start by stating one thing you find admirable about that person. Then begin to explore why the person voted for who they did. And listen, really listen. Find common ground. It may be that both of you feared the same things. It may be that both of you voted based on how votes were cast in the home you grew up in. Regardless of which presidential candidate you voted for, when we understand the reasons behind the vote, we can begin to forge deeper friendships and we can begin to heal our community. This does not necessarily mean we will end up voting for the same candidate the next election, but it may mean we do not tear our communities apart by demonizing those who vote differently than we do. It may mean that we can live our baptismal vows to love and honor and respect the dignity of every human being.

Nieuwhof reminds us that our “salvation does not come from a political party. It comes from a cross.” It comes from Jesus who ate with sinners and who intentionally ate with people who despised him and who actively sought to overthrow the Jesus movement. It comes from Jesus who shows us the way and the work that we are called to do: to love one another and to care for one another, regardless of political positions. “Your church is not something you attend or simply agree with, it’s something you are. . . . You are the church everywhere you go. Authentic, grace-filled, hope-bearing, truthful people are what our friends and neighbors need” right now.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.careynieuwhof.org](http://www.careynieuwhof.org) (Nov. 12, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan\\_haidt\\_can\\_a\\_divided\\_america\\_heal](https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_can_a_divided_america_heal) (Nov. 12, 2016)

Be one of those people who offers hope and who lives a life modeled on the witness of Jesus Christ. And listen, really listen, to the hopes and fears of your neighbor. Seek common ground. Remember that each of you is beloved of God.

Let us pray: O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen. [BCP Prayers and Thanksgivings, #3, p. 815]*