

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Scott Kenefake
“The Greatest Commandment”
John 15:9-17
6th Sunday of Easter
May 6, 2018

⁹As God has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept God’s commandments and abide in God’s love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from God. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that God will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (NRSV; Inclusive language added).

Pastors and Priests are always looking for interesting news and human interest stories (during the week) that have themes that intersect with the main concepts and ideas in the scripture reading—or readings—for the upcoming Sunday.

Exciting, right?!

Well, over the past couple of weeks, there has been a gripping human drama unfolding in Congress; specifically, in House of Representatives, between the Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, and the Chaplain of the House, Father Patrick Conroy, a Jesuit Priest.

Did you know the House of Representatives has a Chaplain? Don’t we have separation of Church and State?

[And the interesting part of this story (for me) is the *human drama*—the caring—or lack of caring between the people involved; the love or lack of love].

To review, the trouble started with, of all things, *a prayer*. In November, as Republicans were moving forward with their ... tax cuts (which were widely criticized at the time for benefitting mostly top income earners), the Rev. Patrick Conroy, a Roman Catholic priest and the House chaplain for the last several years, delivered a prayer on the chamber floor urging lawmakers to ensure that the tax plan’s benefits be *“balanced and shared by all Americans.”*

House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), who is also a Roman Catholic, privately expressed his dissatisfaction to the chaplain. As Conroy recalled to the *New York Times*, the House Speaker told the priest, *“Padre, you just got to stay out of politics.”*

Ryan ultimately asked for Conroy’s resignation – a first in American history for a House chaplain – and the Jesuit obliged, assuming he didn’t have much of a choice.

But following an *“old-fashioned religious feud”* on Capitol Hill, the chaplain changed his mind, *un-resigned*, and effectively dared the GOP leader to fire him (House members in both parties were furious with Ryan). Last Thursday afternoon, the Speaker retreated. According to news reports:

Speaker Paul Ryan reversed himself Thursday and said that the Rev. Patrick Conroy, the chaplain of the House of Representatives whom Ryan forced out of his position last month, can keep his job.

Ryan's announcement came shortly after Conroy told Ryan that he was rescinding his resignation.... "I have accepted Father Conroy's letter and decided that he will remain in his position as Chaplain of the House," Ryan, R-Wis., said in a statement Thursday.

By any fair measure, that was the appropriate decision.

Interestingly, when the Speaker first tried to push the chaplain out, neither Ryan nor his office offered a public explanation for the decision. Indeed, it wasn't altogether clear whether the Speaker even has the authority to unilaterally tell a House chaplain his services are no longer required.

Eventually, Ryan said about decision, *"This was not about politics or prayers, it was about pastoral services. And a number of our members felt like the **pastoral services** were not being adequately served, or offered."*

And while that may sound like a vaguely legitimate reason, according to Conroy, who has no incentive to lie, that wasn't the explanation the Speaker's office gave him. In his letter to congressional leaders Thursday, retracting his resignation, the chaplain told Ryan, *"While you never spoke with me in person, nor did you send me any correspondence, on Friday, April 13th, 2018, your Chief of Staff, Jonathan Burks, came to me and informed me that you were asking for my letter of resignation. I inquired as to whether or not it was 'for cause,' and Mr. Burks mentioned dismissively something like 'maybe it's time that we had a Chaplain that wasn't a Catholic.' He also mentioned my November prayer [about taxes] and an interview with the National Journal Daily."*

He added, *"I have never been disciplined, nor reprimanded, nor have I ever heard a complaint about my ministry during my time as House chaplain."*

One gets the sense Conroy has some concerns about the accuracy of Ryan's version of events.

So what are we left with? A retiring Speaker with waning power tried to oust his chamber's chaplain, creating an unnecessary and divisive religious controversy, and he may not have been entirely truthful about his motivation. Ryan promptly faced a bipartisan backlash from House members, only to eventually back down when the chaplain defied the Republican leader's wishes.¹

Quite the morality play! Or should I say an *immorality* play! A play in which "Christians" of various stripes—both Catholic and Protestant--with the exception of the Chaplain himself—do not come off very well.

Let's think about this in terms of our text from John this morning—Jesus's words are quite a contrast!

You see, in essence, he's saying that it's only in giving your life away *in love* that you can live fully. I will, therefore, (said the Jesus of John in paraphrase) be most fully alive when I am being **crucified**. *To be able to escape the human drive for survival is to escape my own self-centeredness. Life is most perfectly possessed when one is free to lay one's life down in love. It is in this kind of love that you must **abide**, and when you do, my joy will be with you and your joy will be full.*

These words, I think offer a powerful mystical insight into the meaning of life.

*Love, Jesus continues, is the secret to life; that is why my new commandment to you is so simple: You are to love one another as I have loved you. The greatest love is found when you are free to give your life away. That is also the **doorway***

¹ Steve Benen, *Paul Ryan Retreats Following Ill-Advised Fight with House Chaplain*, The Maddow Blog, May 4, 2018

into a new consciousness. Walk through this door and you will no longer be disciples or followers or servants; you will be **friends**. We will share a mutuality of the divine mission to bring life—abundant life—to all.²

How differently the *Chaplain's Tale* would have played out if these words had been kept in mind! It probably never would have happened in the first place!

Jesus's teachings on the centrality of *love* in our lives have implications, however, far beyond our interpersonal relationships.

For example, Eric Alexander, recently wrote in *Progressing Spirit: Exploration in Theology, Spirituality, and the News*, that:

*Jesus's [teachings] focused on **social justice** and helping address sociological ills ... He directly embraced opportunities for advancement in the world, and sought an overflowing spirit that supported, embraced, and advocated for others in need, especially those in the greatest need (Luke 10:25-37).*

Additionally, when Jesus was asked how one could find life, he told the parable of the good Samaritan, which suggested that people in positive spiritual alignment would help others even when it should seem inconvenient or difficult.

Jesus focused on loving others and being open, affirming, forgiving, and inclusive; and valuing equality.³

You see, when we start viewing the world—the creation itself--and human relationships-- through the "lens" of love and start *abiding in it* (as Jesus says)—experiencing it! *then* we actually become **friends with God**! *That's very horizontal, intimate, relational language!*

What Jesus is describing here is *not* redemption of the fallen, but transformation of the *open*! He's saying that there is—and will be—*no separation in our oneness*. God is part of you; you are part of God. The same life and love that flow from God through the vine of Christ (last week's Gospel text) will flow into God's people, who are the branches.

There is now a mystical and mutual indwelling that will create a new humanity—and this mutual indwelling is not to be understood as an *authority-subject, a master-slave, or even a savior-sinner relationship*. It is *rather* a startling new way by which we are to understand the divine--*horizontally*.

Think of it this way:

"Christianity did not begin with a *confession*. It began with an *invitation* into **friendship**, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service."⁴

Or, as Church Historian, Diana Butler Bass, has put it:

"The language of mysticism and spiritual experience cuts a wide swath through the world's religious traditions, and it presents an alternative theology, that of connection and intimacy. In Christian tradition, Jesus speaks this language when he claims, "The Father and I are one" (John 10: 30), and when he breathes on his followers and fills them with God's Spirit (20: 22); it appears in the testimony of the apostle Paul, who converts during a mystical encounter with

² John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 2013, pp. 195, 196

³ Eric Alexander, *Jeism*, *Progressing Spirit: Theology, Spirituality, and the News*, May 3, 2018

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*

Christ on a road; and it fills the effusive poetry of John the Evangelist, whose vision of God is nothing short of one in which the whole of creation is absorbed into love. When the Bible is read from the perspective of divine nearness, it becomes clear that ... the biblical narrative is that of a God who comes close, compelled by a burning desire to make heaven on earth and occupy human hearts.”⁵

Friends, the *Good News*, is that God has come near! Let us celebrate that Good news as we prepare to celebrate Communion—Community—together.

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World-A Spiritual Revolution*