

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
January 26, 2020- 3rd Sunday after Epiphany-A  
Given at St. Mark's, Bridgewater, CT

Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

**'I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.'** †

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'That there be no divisions among you...' Hmmm. How hauntingly appropriate and timely—these words from St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians—on this weekend, on which our nation is undergoing the historical impeachment trial of our President and on which we hold the Annual Meeting for our Parish of St. Mark's.

When I've had the chance to listen to presentations from the Senate floor these past few days, despite the conflict, I've been struck by how blessed I am to live in a free nation like ours... and as I read the various committee reports and learned about the many events that have taken place over the past year at St. Mark's, I'm struck by how blessed I am to be part of this community of faith. I am also very conscious of the many divisions that exist not only among the people of this nation, but within our small community in Bridgewater (i.e., the Grange and Main Street Beautification issues). And I'm encouraged by St. Paul's words, which highlight the responsibility we all have, as Christians, to be united toward the same purpose, no matter our differences.

As human beings, we take pride in belonging, in being part of a group, whether a national political organization, a local town or civic group, or this church. Whether we work on organizing community events that matter to us, serve on the Vestry, or strive to make our Penney Auction or our community dinners a success, we often identify ourselves with the ideals promoted by those groups. And so often, we find ourselves in conflict with others, even members of that same group. Divisions within a community—be it a nation, a political party, a religious community, or a family—can easily erode into animosities. Strongly held views (right or wrong) can lead people to reject those who have differing views... they can lead to a break down in fellowship with others and toward the condemnation and even demonization of another. Paul's words are so very appropriate today... for they help us remember to deal with those who differ from us in a spirit of compassion.

There's been much controversy this week over whether we should pray for the President and our Congressional leaders during our nation's present dispute. Some have asked, why should I pray for someone I'm against? I've struggled with it in my own prayer life. Our Presiding Bishop Michael addressed this about 3 years ago... I quote:

"The Prayer Books of the Anglican/Episcopal way have always included prayer for those "who bear the authority of government," praying in a variety of ways that they may lead in the ways of God's wisdom, justice and truth.

When we pray for Donald, Barack, George, Bill, George, or Jimmy...

Presidents of the United States, we pray for their well-being, for they too are

children of God, but we also pray for their leadership in our society and world. We pray that they will lead in the ways of justice and truth. We pray that their leadership will truly serve not partisan interest but the common good. When we pray for them, we are actually praying for our nation, for our world, indeed we are praying for ourselves.

Prayer is not a simplistic cheer or declaration of support. Prayers of lament cry out in pain and cry for justice. Prayer can celebrate. Prayer can also ask God to intervene and change the course of history, to change someone's mind, or his or her heart. When we pray for our enemies, we may find that we are simultaneously emboldened to stand for justice while we are also less able to demonize another human being."

In other words, we must always remember the point St. Paul made: the saving grace of God does not come from any human leader or group; it comes from the sacrificial love of God. It's wrong to identify the Christian faith with one particular understanding, belief or practice, and it's wrong to identify our Church with one particular group or person.

We, who call ourselves Christian, are called to move away from the juvenile tendencies so prevalent in our society now... those adolescent desires to be right, to win, to be in control.... for these are simple human pursuits, not God's. Of course, we must express our beliefs and values and we must also listen when others do the same. It's not about self-denial or submission, but about fellowship and compassion. The grace and power of God does not come through particular leaders or groups, whether in larger society or in this parish Church. God's ways are not human ways. God's way is the way of the Cross—a confusing, overwhelming, incomprehensible expression of the love and power— it's the way of unselfish, sacrificial love.

As we come to the altar this morning and later, as we participate in our annual meeting... may we all strive to follow the way of God, the way of Jesus. 'I appeal to you... In the name of Lord Jesus Christ... that there be no divisions among you... that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose'... the love of God, in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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