

Drawing the line

Mark 9:38-41

September 30, 2018

Were you listening on Thursday? Did you listen as Christine Blasey Ford testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee, providing her account of being sexually assaulted at age fifteen by Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh? Did you listen as he vehemently denied any participation in that assault or in any such behavior? Did you listen as senators from one side of the aisle and the other asked questions of Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh, or more accurately, made their own statements intended to score political points for their side and to humiliate the other?

If you did listen, or even if you just followed the story in the news, how did it make you feel?

I felt pain and sadness for Ms. Ford, for her and for any woman who might have to endure such brutish treatment. And I felt astonished and baffled by the absolute incongruity of what she said and what he said. They were not expressing differing takes on an ambiguous encounter. She said it absolutely happened and he said it absolutely did not. Somebody is telling the truth and somebody is not and that's scary, because it means that either she is knowingly undermining a man's reputation and threatening his career, or that he, instead of taking responsibility for his own mistakes, is covering over his guilt with bluster and unconscionable lies.

But what disturbed me most was the process itself: the attacks, the gamesmanship, the bitter partisan divide. The senators were focussed not on getting to the truth, but on winning the fight. It was all about winning sympathy, winning votes, showing strength, putting on a show, prevailing over ... the enemy.

The Thursday hearings reflected once more the deep polarization in our society. The divide between Republican and Democrat, between left and right, between white and black, even between women and men, has become so wide and so deep it is hard to believe that there is any longer any core of commonly held values or first principles that keeps us together as Americans or even as human beings. We do not debate, we demonize. And even if our politicians do not really believe their opponents to be evil, they surely encourage their constituents to believe so.

What do we have to say to all this? Do we have something to say? Do we have something to say as Christians, as followers of Jesus? Do we have something to show, by our own words, by our own attitudes, by our own behavior? When we say, "The peace of Christ be with you," who is you?

Let's play a little word game. It's kind of like word association, where I say a word and you say the first word that comes to mind, only in this case, I will say a word and I want you to say "good" if you think it's a good word or "bad" if you think it's a bad word.

For example if I say “peace,” you would say ... “good.” Or if I say “cruelty,” you would say ... “bad.”

Hate ...

Love ...

Justice ...

Favoritism ...

Forgiving ...

Judgmental ...

Blueberries ...

Lima beans ...

Evangelical ...

Pentecostal ...

Baptist ...

Roman Catholic ...

Where do you draw the line? Whom do you consider part of your group?

John was clear: “He doesn’t belong to our group.” He was not asking Jesus a question, but proudly reporting the action they had taken on his behalf. “We told him to stop ... because he doesn’t belong to our group!” He doesn’t belong to our group. He doesn’t belong.

How do you think they defined “our” group? The band of followers traveling with Jesus? Those who had listened to him and watched him and eaten with him and slept beside him day after day? Those whom he had called and invited to follow? The chosen ones? “Our” group?

How did Jesus define “our” group? “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Whoever does not separate themselves from us, whoever does not make us the enemy, is for us, part of us, part of our group. They must draw the line, not us.

How do you define “our” group? Where do you draw the line? The question matters because if we cannot live in peace with each other, with brothers and sisters who call themselves too by Jesus’ name -- if we draw a sharp line between “our” group and “their” group, between us and them -- then what hope is there for making peace in the world?

But look at us! Evangelicals, progressives, soul-winners, justice-seekers, left, right, those who like everything done decently and in order, and those who want the Spirit to move. Isn't the church of Jesus Christ on this earth today as partisan, as parochial, as polarized, as bitterly divided against itself, as everybody else? Do we have anything to say? Do we have anything to show?

It has been my personal mission throughout my ministry to try to bridge this divide. This mission is born out of my own history, my own experience of Jesus: raised in an evangelical home, taught early to love Jesus with all my heart and soul and strength, with everything I am and everything I have, choosing to be ordained in the United Church of Christ, not raised in it, but choosing it, because of its emphasis on bringing people together, because of its commitment not to following tradition, but to following Jesus, because of its urgency not just to talk about faith, but to live it. I was and am an evangelical Christian gladly serving in the most liberal of denominations.

But I hate labels! What purpose does a label serve except to draw a line? I am ... a follower of Jesus, no more, no less. I appreciate the evangelical church at its best: passionate in faith, loving God with heart, worshipping with passion. And I appreciate the progressive church at its best: putting love in action, opening wide the arms of love, offering freely the embrace of God's grace -- "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" And I pray as Jesus prayed, that they may be one, that they may learn to appreciate each other, learn from each other, love each other, be the church together.

But that prayer is getting harder and harder to pray, and the work of bridging the divide harder and harder to do. The evangelical church of my youth is not the evangelical church of today which has taken a hard turn to the right, wrapping itself in a new phariseism, seemingly losing the message of God astonishing grace along the way, defining very precisely who is in and who is out, who is "us" and who is "them." But the progressive church can be just as harsh, just as judgmental, just as eager to make sure you know that "those" people who call themselves Christians are NOT part of our group.

During my lifetime the dreams of ecumenism, of a worldwide church coming together, have been replaced by the reality of an increasingly divided church, divided not so much by faith itself, but by allowing itself to be co-opted by one political agenda or another.

It is hard work to bring the church together, but we must try, mustn't we? Listen to Jesus. If lines are to be drawn, let them draw the line. You must not be the cause of division. Or as Paul put it in one of his letters: "Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody."

Do your part! Don't draw lines! They may draw a line between you and them, but you must make sure you draw not a line, but a circle, a circle large enough to include them, and your love, your willingness to listen, your readiness to see what is good in them, may make peace.

“That they may be one.” Jesus’ prayer and the motto of the United Church of Christ. His desire, our mission.

We are not celebrating communion this morning, but know that every time we do, we embody Jesus’ prayer. When we come to the table, what do we celebrate, what do we remember, what brings us together? Jesus, only Jesus. Jesus who with his own body broke down the walls that divide us. Jesus who invites all without condition to come. It is not our table, not the table of this church, not the table of the United Church of Christ, but Christ’s table, Christ’s table where all are welcome.

We come to the table to be joined, body and soul, to him, and by being joined to him being joined to each other, body and soul. When we eat and drink together, we are made to be sisters and brothers, sisters and brothers to each other, and sisters and brothers to all who share this meal, wherever and however.

In the words of our church’s constitution: “The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession.” Kindred in Christ, sisters and brothers, alike bearing Jesus’ name, made one in him, made one by him.

We don’t have to make the oneness, we just have to live it!

We don’t make the peace, we simply offer it. The peace of Christ be with you.