

## I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT...

### *Politics in Church*

Matthew 10:34-39

August 20, 2023

I wish the preacher would talk about politics in church...said no one...ever.

Actually, that's not quite true. According to a recent Public Religion Research Institute survey, 18% of churchgoers wish they heard more about political divisions from the pulpit. So, to one in every five of you, you are welcome! To the rest, hang in there! It will be over soon.

For now, we'll leave aside the thorny question of what constitutes a political issue in church. Among some, the color of the carpet or the words of the Doxology would qualify. Dare I say...applause in worship? The uncomfortable truth is we *need* to talk about the political climate because political animosity is tearing us apart and threatening our future. If you haven't witnessed this in your own life, God bless you, but you have surely heard about it. A recent essay by Thomas Edsall makes the point plain. His title is: "Gut-Level Hatred Is Consuming Our Political Life."

This downward spiral toward gut-level hatred should be a cause of deep concern for all people of faith. Without a foundation of basic understanding and empathy, challenging tasks like cooperation and compromise for the common good become nearly impossible. As a pastor, I am particularly concerned about how this animosity has invaded communities of faith. Some churches become little more than weekly rallies for political causes or even candidates. In other cases, escalating disagreement devolves into open hostility, and the Body of Christ is irreparably fractured. My list of colleagues who have left congregations (or ministry altogether) in the last three years because of threats or the persistent strain of unabated conflict is growing.

For the sake of our shared future, for posterity's sake, something must change.

And so, we need to talk about politics in church because we are impacted by the alarming trends around us *and* for another reason as well. Pseudo-religious language is being used to bolster lies that are not only divisive but deeply dangerous. The rise of Christian nationalism (a topic about which we will learn more this fall) is perhaps the most pernicious of these lies. Trading on appeals to blatant racism and stoking flames of fear, messengers of Christian nationalism aim to drive wedges of division even deeper in pursuit of political power on religious grounds. For shame. When we are this divided and the fires of our hatred are fed, the sad truth is that violence becomes inevitable.

And so, we need to talk about politics in church because, in the vacuum left by the silence of our hushed voices, pronouncements that betray the gospel and twist the scriptures into a weapon are given spotlights and megaphones.

And this is not the first time that faith has been warped in such a tragic way. The history hits close to home. This summer, I read Timothy Egan's *Fever in the Heartland*. It is the disturbing story of the Ku Klux Klan's reemergence in the early Twentieth Century, a rise centered in the state of Indiana and made possible by the active and public leadership of Christian clergy. On a Sunday in January of 1923, the Reverend Aubrey H. Moore took to the pulpit of First Christian Church in Noblesville to answer the question from the title of his much-publicized sermon: "Is the Ku Klux Klan a Menace to America?"

Now, Moore was no outlier; he was Noblesville's most popular preacher a century ago. The local newspaper reported that the gathering in his church that day was the largest in a house of worship in many years. The pastor proceeded to defend, and then openly praise, the Klan. The menace, it turns out, was its enemies. Reverend Moore closed his sermon with a prayer, asking God to "bless every Ku Kluxer who may be under the sound of my voice." And the congregation rose with their hands in the air as the preacher concluded, "I would rather wear a white sheet in the dark than see my country in a shroud."

This history stands as a warning to us—that in a time of rising extremism and bitter division, the voice of faith must be clear and rooted in the Gospel. The voice of insipid fear, and the drive for power, can cause us to veer from the paths of righteousness in ways we might not even imagine possible. Those Christian clergy who provided religious justification for the KKK's open pursuit of power were people just like me, just like us. They were rewarded with financial support and political influence. Those preachers had much to gain. All they had to do was forfeit their soul.

Baptist theologian Russell Moore has been writing passionately in recent years about the need for the Church of Jesus Christ to repent if we are to offer a compelling word to the world. This description particularly struck me. He writes, "We are losing too many of a generation—not because they are secularists but because they believe [that deep down] we are." In other words, there are many today who assume that the Church has sold its soul for influence, and it is hard to blame them. For religious faith captive to the quest for political power breeds justifiable cynicism, and we are raising a generation of religious cynics. We need to offer a courageous, Christ-centered alternative.

It might surprise you that I think the answer comes in this morning's scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew. This is not a greatest hits text. Most of us prefer a vision of Jesus the gentle shepherd,

Jesus the wise teacher, Jesus the patient, merciful, forgiving savior. But the earliest Christian creed marked a line in the sand drawn by his disciples. It was this: *Jesus is Lord*.

Today's gospel reading is not a public address or a political speech. There is no large crowd. At the beginning of Matthew, Chapter 10, Jesus gathers his twelve disciples. He calls them by name, and then he prepares to send them out into the world, like sheep into the midst of wolves, he says. Just before this morning's passage, Jesus says to his disciples, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Jesus addresses his closest followers, these twelve who have left everything behind to follow him.

And what Jesus describes, drawing on the prophet Micah, is already the experience of those disciples. They are living in a time of dissension, strife, and turmoil. Their decision to follow Jesus has caused conflict, and there will be more, because what Jesus asks of them, what the kingdom of God demands of them, is total devotion. Their commitment to him must take precedence over all other loyalties. And when they choose to make Jesus Lord, not everyone will rejoice.

The decision to follow Jesus is a choice for change. Following Jesus is not about seeking worldly power or influence. Following Jesus is not about living in fear. Following Jesus is not about claiming superiority or standing in the place of a judge. Following Jesus must mean living as he lived—with heartfelt compassion for the suffering, welcome for the outcast, forgiveness for the sinner. Following Jesus means lifting our own crosses to embody the kind of sacrificial love that forever changed the world. That's what it means to say, "Jesus is Lord."

And there is no false advertising. Jesus is clear that such discipleship will not be easy, in his time or in ours, for those idols that desire our devotion will not relent without a struggle. They will make promises, tempting us with power, unsettling us with fears of

weakness or irrelevance. We might lose what we've been told is most important.

When we are seduced into believing that our primary identity is determined by our politics and that our primary community is the tribe of likeminded partisans in our echo chamber, being part of a church says something entirely different. It *must* say something entirely different.

Listen. I will tell you who you are. You are a child of God. And so is everyone you encounter. You belong in here not because we represent your political tribe, but because we are trying to follow Jesus together.

Last fall, we at Second were blessed to have Father Michael Lapsley with us for several days. Father Michael has served as a priest for many years in South Africa. He was an active part of the anti-Apartheid movement, a movement that was, in many ways, led by people of faith. It was the inverse of those Christian voices praising the KKK. His leadership did not go unnoticed. Father Michael was sent a letter bomb in 1990. It resulted in the loss of both his hands, the sight in one eye, and serious burns all over his body. Father Michael was undaunted. He continued his work tirelessly. He chose forgiveness over retribution. Michael told us, "They took my hands, but the only weapon I've ever had was my tongue. They did not take that." One afternoon, Father Michael and I were talking in my office about the deep divisions in our country, and Michael shared a joke they used to tell in South Africa in the 1980s. It goes like this: "There are two possible solutions to our crisis here. One is miraculous, and one is realistic. One solution is that God will send down holy angels and sort us all out. That's the realistic solution. The miraculous one is that we will sit down and talk with our enemies."

I found both truth and hope in that bit of humor. We need a miracle. And we've come to the right place. In here we tell stories about a God who brings life from

death, who creates new hearts and new communities within and among us.

I am convinced that we in the church can offer a powerful voice in the public square. And here's how. Our loyalty must be to no person or ideology, but only to God. We must never sacrifice this profound call for the polarized pronouncements of the purely political. We must speak, whenever possible, in a clear and unified voice. And whenever necessary, we must love those with whom we disagree. The bitter, rancid, rotting political climate we experience is not inescapable. But we need beacons of moral leadership, and we can be those beacons. We can serve and not demonize those in need. We can confess our complicity with systems that keep some people down, and then we can do something to change them. We can see gifts and not threats in our differences. We can call forth the better angels of our nature.

I'll speak for myself here. I am determined to speak and act outside of this space in ways that have integrity and align with what I confess to believe when I'm inside this space. I am determined to preach and live a faith that has a chance of finding a home in the hearts of my sons. I want to give them a vision for a better world than the one we're passing on. And fifty years from now, I want to rest secure trusting that I did my very best to preach and live the love of God. I want a politics that reflects the conviction that each of us bears the image of God and is therefore worthy of love for no other reason than that. I want to remember that ultimately, I am accountable not to human opinion but to the sovereign God who calls me.

One hundred years from now, I want to be counted among Father Lapsley and not Rev. Moore. Now, I am not naive. But my Bible tells me this is strength, not weakness. There is no easy path, but my faith convicts me of this—that only love stands a chance of repairing what has been broken.

Only love. Only love. Let us pray.

*Gracious God, tune our hearts to the rhythms of your goodness reflected in your beloved children; turn our hearts toward one another and grant us courage so that we might live the truth we profess. Amen.*