

Practicing Politics, Keeping Faith

4/10/2016

Matthew 7:12, Ephesians 4:29-32, James 1:19-20

For this sermon series I am again using resources from Pastor Adam Hamilton, lead pastor at Church of the Resurrection United Methodist Church in Leawood Kansas.

Let's acknowledge up front that we have a bit of trepidation about talking about political issues in church, in part because these are divisive issues. We don't want our preacher to say that this or that position is God's position on a certain issue, and we don't want our preacher to tell us who to vote for. I want to reassure you that I will not be telling you how you should vote – or what God's position on an issue is, that is not the purpose of this sermon series. What I hope to get across is that these are complex issues and no one side has all the right answers and no one side misses the boat. In the weeks ahead we're going to be talking about some truly complex issues: immigration, radical Islam, and health care.

So today I'm not going to be telling you who to vote for, and I don't believe that one party is God's party. I think both get some things right, and both get some things wrong. I'm also not going to tell you how you must think about these controversial issues—they are controversial in large part because each defies simple or simplistic answers. My intention is to help us think about how the scriptures and our faith might connect to these issues, and to invite you to approach these issues in a such a way that you listen and are open to hearing the views of others. I want us to practice our politics in such a way that we keep the faith—that is, that we act as Christians as we are doing politics.

Among the challenges in politics today is that we've become an increasingly polarized nation. This is, I believe, one of the greatest threats to our nation. Abraham Lincoln, quoting Jesus, noted that, "A house divided cannot stand." It's not that we can't have differences of opinion, but when we stop listening, question the motives of the other, see them as evil and are unwilling to work together, the foundations begin to falter.

The division in our country is not just in Washington. About twenty years ago approximately 17% of Republicans and Democrats viewed the opposing party “very unfavorably.” Today the number is 43% for Republicans and 38% for Democrats. I heard this week that more adults today would rather their kids marry someone of another religion than to marry someone from the opposing political party.

Pastor Adam spoke with Congressman Kevin Yoder, who represents the 3rd District in Kansas and is a member of Church of the Resurrection. Adam asked him about the partisan divide in our country and in Washington. He said when he came to Washington he was certain Congress was the problem. He noted that there are members of Congress who are divisive and vitriolic. But he said he’d come to believe that Congress wasn’t the cause of the divisiveness in our country, but a reflection of it. He shared that, when he has tried to work across the aisle and find a common, compromise solution, he’s received furious, hostile messages from some of his constituents, including at least one that said the sender hoped he and his family would die so that someone else could fill his office! The problem starts not with those we elect to office, but with us.

We’ve lost a sense of civility—of holding our own views with humility, of recognizing that others hold opposite views and they may have good reason for holding their views. We’ve forgotten how to have thoughtful, respectful discussions and dialogue. We share our thoughts on social media without thinking about how our message affects others. Rather than winning them over, we push them away.

I think the question isn’t whether we can share our views. We’ve got to do that. The problem comes when we assume we have all the answers. Often these opinions are not carefully researched and are simplistic responses to complex issues. When we speak about people we disagree with, we mischaracterize their view, or attribute motives to them without really knowing them. Often what we do is more like gossip, backbiting and slander than thoughtful criticism. Then we share our views in a way that feels more like we are poking others in the eye rather than inviting serious conversation and dialogue. Sometimes it is people who claim a Christian faith who are worst at this.

In preparing for this sermon series Pastor Adam read a new book that has recently come out by Mark Gerzon who started his career in family therapy then moved into mediation and has been called upon by congress to help Republicans and Democrats to learn to work together for the common good. He also did this same kind of work in Africa helping war torn countries learn to work together. The book is called *The Reunited States of America: How We Can Bridge the Partisan Divide*. Adam feels it is outstanding; and wishes every American could read it...the author Mark Gerzon said something Adam thought was interesting. He noted that the iPhone never could have been designed by Congress. The iPhone was the result of vision, and teams of people who took the vision, argued, debated, tested ideas and sought to solve the technological problems until they finally came up with a great solution that they would all take credit for. We need Republicans, Democrats, Independents and others involved in the conversations of working toward solutions that benefit everyone. We need each other.

Often when we talk about the political parties it's like we think of them as teams in a win or lose battle. So let's think about the Vikings, every player receives a paycheck from the Vikings organization. Their job, what they get paid for is to win. They are supposed to strategize and do the best job possible to beat the other team – they get paid more money if they win. The Green Bay Packers have the same philosophy – to have their side win. We don't want those teams to get together and say, "hey how can we just make this a good game, we don't want to win, we just want to be friends." We don't want that, we want the Vikings to win 30 to nothing or maybe you want Green Bay to win 30 to nothing. But the point is we want our team to win.

But here's the thing when it comes to Congress, they all are receiving paychecks from the same organization, right. And you're paying those paychecks. And they're all on the same team. This is where we miss out, because if it's about Republicans winning or Democrats winning, then in the process of doing that, it's about me getting the victory and I've got to stop you from getting the victory and I've got to stop any forward progress or momentum you make because I want to win. And when that happens whatever the opposing team proposes, any ideas they have this is the answer: NO. You want some more money for your programs?: NO. You want

to try moving in this direction?: NO, NO, NO. That's what politics begins to look like and we are in gridlock, we are unwilling to compromise in any way because our team has to win. The reality is when it comes to winners and losers in terms of our politics, that doesn't serve us very well. We are all on the same team: Democrats and Republicans, we have different ideas and of course we are going to fight for our ideas, but in the end we are looking for: how do we move us forward to accomplish some kind of solution to our problems. At least that's how many of us see this process.

Every age and generation has disagreements. In Jesus' day it was the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots and the Essenes. In the early church the apostles regularly had to address the question of divisions. Their words defined what Christian ethics looks like, starting with a reminder that we are called to love—not a warm fuzzy feeling but a way of acting towards others with respect and humility, seeking the good of the other. This was summarized in Jesus' great commandment to “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

If the Golden Rule does not apply in politics where does it apply? Before you speak, or type something in Social Media, or pass on an e-mail to your entire list of friends, stop to ask, “How would I feel if someone did this or said this to or about me?” Last year we memorized a scripture verse from Paul's letter to the Ephesians: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, that your words may give grace to those who hear.” Do you practice this verse?

The great love chapter in I Corinthians was written by Paul not for weddings, but to help a community that found itself in deep division and conflict with one another.

Listen to Paul's words: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” So you can be right, but if you haven't practiced love, you have missed the mark.

Let's read the rest of this together, remembering that the love being described here is not a warm fuzzy feeling, but a Christian Ethic. No remember Paul is writing about divisions and conflict amongst people.

Please read with me from up on the screen: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

I want to end with the words of James, words meant to help Christians deal with divisions in the early church. It captures one of the keys to healing the divisions in our country today.

Let's read together from James 1:19: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry.” God gave us two ears and one mouth in direct proportion to how God intended us to use them!

And an amazing thing happens when we stop and start to listen to people, and we don't try to formulate our argument against what they have to say before we respond and we respond half as much as we listen, and we're careful not to get angry, is we find that people come together as opposed to building walls we build bridges. And that's my hope and prayer for us as a congregation. Alleluia, amen.

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All our scriptures this morning instruct us in our interactions with one another. All readings come from the New Revised Standard Version.

**Matthew 7:12:**

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

**Ephesians 4:29-32:**

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a

seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

**James 1:19-20:**

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of these holy words.