

Message Road Map

Series: *The Mission of the Church in Politically Divisive Times*

Message 2: “Disagreeing Politically and Loving Unconditionally”

Texts: John 13:34-35, Galatians 6:2, Matthew 5:47

Good morning, everyone. If you are new with us today, we’ve been reflecting on *The Mission of the Church in Politically Divisive Times*. Last Sunday, we looked at how Christians are called to participate in the political process in ways that honor Jesus and reflect the value system of the Kingdom of God. The distinctiveness of our voice and credibility of our witness depends, in part, on our willingness to being kind and respectful to people with whom we disagree. If you missed that message, you can get it on our church app and website, along with my “Pastor Mark” podcast and YouTube channels. Today we will reflect on some things in the Bible and our own experience that will help us love unconditionally, even as we disagree politically. Keeping this goal in mind, it is helpful to begin by remembering a few things that wisdom teaches as we build and maintain healthy relationships over time.

First, **disagreement is unavoidable** in almost every area of life. It’s not a question of “if” we will disagree but “when” we will disagree. And we see this not only in **politics** but also in our **families and groups of friends**, at **work**, in the **church** . . . just about everywhere. But while disagreement is unavoidable, **division is a choice**. We can have disagreements in our **marriage** and choose *not* to divorce. We can have disagreements with **friends** and still hangout on the weekends. We can have disagreements at work and choose *not* to change jobs. And, yes, we can have disagreements with the people in our congregation and choose *not* to go church shopping. So again, disagreement is unavoidable, but division is a choice.

Second, it’s important to remember that **disagreement and conflict are not bad in and of themselves**. Rather, when done *God’s* way, the tension created by conflict is a catalyst for grow. It can help us see blind spots, mistakes, and misunderstandings, which gives us a chance to adjust our perceptions, tweak our relational style, recalibrate our attitude, and change our approach. These kinds of adjustments broaden our horizon of understanding and actually *deepen* our relationships.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, it’s important to remember that **political disagreements are the result of divergent experiences not low IQ, bad character, or corrupt faith**.

Regarding intelligence, when we think we’re right, we often *think* it’s because we’re smart, and given this mentality, it is easy to assume that everyone who disagrees is dumb. Many years ago, I heard an older person say to a younger person, “The only reason that you are a Democrat is because you are young, naïve, and idealistic (*and you don’t make any money*). But as you get older, wiser, and wealthier you will become a Republican like me.” Now, some of you may be laughing in agreement, and I can see the humor here, but think about what it implies: that the decision to affiliate with the opposing political party is grounded in ignorance. It’s like saying, “If you were smarter, you’d make a different choice.” But this kind of sweeping assumption blinds us to the fact that political differences grow out of divergent life experiences, not stupidity.

And starting with the assumption that people with whom you disagree are stupid is not a very loving *or smart* thing to do.

Political differences are also not of bad character. In other words, those who have different political beliefs don't hold those beliefs because they are bad people with sinister motives, and if we start with this assumption, we choose division and hostility. How can I have a productive relationship with you if I know that deep down inside you think I'm a bad person? It just doesn't work. And **the same applies when we assume that those who disagree with us aren't "real" Christians**, that they are cultural sellouts or false prophets trying to destroy "biblical" Christianity. We can use orthodox religious language to demonize others, but it doesn't make it any less sinful. In fact, if we assume that using such language or invoking the name of God somehow makes this wrong behavior right, it's probably worse.

When we work with any of these assumptions, that political differences result from ignorance, immorality, or heresy, it's difficult to treat others the way we want to be treated. Rather, we tend to judge them unfairly and write them off. We gather our negative assumptions about their intelligence, character, and faith and construct harmful stereotypes that encourage us to dismiss them as inferior or corrupt. We say things like, "Oh, I know everything about you because you are a Democrat," or "I already know what you think because you are a Republican." This is something that we resent when others do it to us, even though we feel justified in doing it to others.

But mature Christians don't go there because Jesus didn't go there. Jesus didn't look at your sin, judge you harshly, and write you off. Quite the opposite, God extended **grace**. And every time you sing a song about God's grace and mercy, every time you confess your sins, you're stepping out in faith that God still loves you; you're affirming that *even though* your sinful actions made you an enemy of God, that God refuses to reject or abandon you. You're affirming that God finds a way to stay in relationship with you even though you make it difficult. And as God finds a way to stay in loving relationship with you, God says, "I want you to find a way to stay in loving relationship with others. Even when you don't agree, I want you to love one another, which according to 1 Corinthians 13 is not just a religious platitude but personal action that requires us to be *patient, kind, humble, compassionate, selfless, honest, and long-suffering*. When we ignore this command and devour each other, we dishonor God.

But again, part of the good news of the gospel is that God still loves us even though we are wrong about all kinds of things. Indeed, **God still loves us even when we are wrong about him!** In other words, God loves us **despite our misinformed, experience-based, evolving views,**" which is a really important point, that our views *do* in fact emerge out of experience, evolve over time, and are sometimes mistaken.

Now some people may immediately object: "I don't have experienced-base, *evolving* views—my beliefs come from the infallible, inerrant, eternal Word of God, which is the same today as yesterday." But even if you are right, as a finite and fallen human being you are subject to mistakes, including moral and religious mistakes, including mistakes in the way you interpret the

Bible and apply it to contemporary issues. This is part of what it means to be a human being, which is why we resonate with the odd adage, “To err is human but to forgive is divine.”

As we live out our faith in the real world, we make mistakes, learn new things, integrate new insights, adjust our worldview, change our behavior, and grow throughout the entire course of our lives. This is why we see, think, feel, and act differently at 5 years old than when we are 25 years old, and why we see, think, feel, and act differently at 25 years old than when we are 60 years old. As we walk all this stuff out in the real world, God continues to love us and works to stay in relationship with us. And just as God loves us despite our misinformed, experience-based, evolving views, God calls us to do the same for others.

We see this clearly in the gospel of John, chapter 13, where Jesus is recorded as saying, “*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another*” (vv 34-35).

So, how do you know if people are true followers of Jesus? Watch the way they treat people. What makes them a Christian has nothing to do with the political party with which they affiliate, or even how they vote on specific issues, but how they treat others, especially those with whom they disagree, with the same grace, love, and respect that Jesus has extended to them. Jesus says, this is how you will know.

But this is hard, right? So how do we do it? How do we loving unconditionally even as we disagree politically? Well, the Apostle Paul gives us a great strategy in his letter to the Galatian Christians, who also dealt with intense disagreement and conflict.

He says in **Galatians 6:2**: “*Carry each other’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*” So, even when we disagree passionately about important things, I am called to move in your direction, to understand the burdens of your life, and to help you bear those burdens. And when I do this, something awesome happens. I learn things that help me better understand you, which empowers me to respond in love rather than judgement. Paul says, this is how we fulfill the law of Christ, this is how we love one another the way that God has loved us in Christ.

And this leads us to the main point: when we choose to listen deeply to the hurts of others and get up under their burdens, shoulder to shoulder, to help them, **what divides us diminishes and what unites us surfaces**. It’s by carrying each other’s burdens that we are empowered to disagree without dividing, to disagree and continue to love unconditionally. Friends, this is how parents can avoid being alienated from their children, how one friend can avoid being alienated from another, how one person in the church can avoid being alienated from another person in the church. This is how the body of Christ around the world can remain unified, maintain our distinctive voice, and preserve the credibility of our witness. This is how we find peace and change the world.

Now while we sometimes do this for people who are mostly like us, Jesus says, this is not enough. It’s not enough to surround yourself with people who are basically just like you. No, the real power in the command to love others as Jesus has loved you, the real power in the strategy

of carrying each other's burden, is released when you do this for people who hold very different views, both inside and outside the church.

Jesus says in **Matthew 5:47**: “. . . *if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?*” In other words, getting along with “your people,” those who think like you, vote like you, believe like you, and worship like you, this is easy. It's unremarkable because everyone does that. But when you worship with people who think and vote differently, when you share life with people with whom you deeply disagree, when you serve shoulder to shoulder with those you perceive as political enemies, well THAT is remarkable, that is amazing and noticeable.

But if you only hang out with “your” people, if you only listen to “your” people, if you only build friendships with “your” people, then you are no different than those who rejected the message of Jesus 2000 years ago to chase after false gods. And think about it, if Jesus had insisted on remaining with his people, he would've never stepped foot on this planet, and we would still be dead in our sin. But, again, Jesus says, love others as I have loved you. Be a different kind of people by building friendship with different kinds of people.

This is the opposite of what the culture is telling you to do: to run to the extremes of your party, surround yourself with people who think like you, demonize those on the other side as the perverted who have turned away from God and are destroying our country, and then do all in your power to destroy them. Why? Because it's difficult to raise money and activate a base in the middle. It's hard to WIN elections in the middle, and our culture is obsessed with a win-at-all-cost mentality.

But Jesus, didn't fall for that! And he tells us not to fall for it either. Rather, we are called to be different—very different. And being different cannot stop at tolerating people we haphazardly encounter who happened to be different. It must go beyond this as we **actively** seek to build relationships with people that see the world differently, as we intentionally and purposefully show those we perceive to be political enemies kindness, respect, and love by helping them carry their burdens. This is what heals our divisions. This is what models God's will to a watching world. This is what gets the world's attention so we can point them to Jesus.

I know this is hard, that it requires sacrifice. But this way of life was so important to Jesus that he died for it. And he invites us to give ourselves away in service to this mission. So how are we doing? Are there people with whom we need to make amends? Are their strained relationships that require us to shift the focus away from being right to do good, to helping bare a burden? What is the next step I need to take to better loves others the way that God has loved me in Christ? These are the kinds of questions I hope we will ponder in the days and weeks to come, so that we heal some of our divisions and grow in the likeness of Christ.