

Message Road Map

Series: *The Mission of the Church in a Politically Divided World*

Message 1: “It’s Not About Winning: How partisan Politics Poisons the Church”

Texts: Philippians 2:14-15; Matthew 5:16; 1 Corinthians 9: 3-6, 12, 19-23

Over the last several years, politics in America has become increasingly tribalistic and contentious. There was a time not too long ago when being at the extreme end of your party was frowned upon, and the power to direct conversations and set policy rested mostly on those working in the middle. When moderate Republicans and Democrats worked together to pass bipartisan legislation that reflected the values of the majority in our country, it was celebrated as a good thing. But somewhere along the way there was a big shift.

People at the extremes in both parties leveraged fear, anger, and dishonesty to capture the energy of their base. Political platforms were revised to reflect this extremism, and anyone who deviates from the party line or tries to work with those across the aisle are painted as pariahs by a weaponized media. Things that were once revered as virtues, like honesty, respect, compassion, openness, moderation, civility, and reasonableness, have been demonized as vices, and now only two things matter: blind loyalty and winning at any cost.

What’s even more concerning is that this tribalistic and punitive spirit is not contained within clearly defined political circles but is expanding into almost every area of life thanks to 24-hour news networks and social media platforms who think they are exempt from the rules that apply to other news outlets. As it spreads into everything nook and cranny of our lives, *everything is politicized*, even the Christian church.

It’s heartbreaking to see people that I know and love get possessed by this divisive spirit and gleefully participate in the madness. Many people who in years past were friends *despite* their political differences can no longer tolerate being around each other. People in the same family, office, school, or church see a post on Facebook or have a political disagreement over lunch, and instead seeing it simply as a difference of opinion they make harsh judgements about the other’s person character and question the legitimacy of their Christian faith. They start avoiding them in real life and speaking horribly behind their backs. Parents stop talking to their adult children, brothers and sisters are alienated by conflict, friends no longer hang out, and disgruntled parishioners leave the church.

I’ve also been embarrassed and angered by clergy colleagues who have jumped on the tribalistic bandwagon, preaching partisan politics from the pulpit, and sharing politically incendiary social media posts. And even more damaging to our witness in the larger world, some high-profile Christian pastors, radio hosts, and TV personalities have almost entirely politicized the church and embraced the win-at-all-costs mentality. Abandoning the value system taught by Jesus, they publicly demonized fellow Christians who hold different opinions as heretics or agents of the devil.

As we move toward 2024, it will most likely get worse. Political commentators on both sides are telling us that this may be the most divisive and dangerous election cycle we’ve ever had, and as

your pastor it is incumbent upon me to remind you of a few things, not the least that we must put God before country, that we must follow Jesus not our political party, and that it's not about winning-at all costs but being willing to sacrifice everything to be faithful to the One who creates, redeems, and sustains us. All earthly things fail, die, and disappear, and this includes your political party. So, it is foolish to pledge your allegiance to these kinds of earthly things. Rather, we pledge our allegiance to Jesus, whose kingdom is eternal and never fails. But pledging our allegiance to Jesus often requires us to say no to ourselves and our political party. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's begin with a principle. When life is predictable and safe, when things are going our way, it is easy to lose sight of what we value and fear the most. But when we experience lots of uncertainty and disappointment it clearly reveals these things. Regardless of what you *say* is most important to you, your reactions to fear and anxiety will *show* people what's truly in your heart. And the way that many pastors, leaders, and high-profile Christians have reacted to all the uncertainty and turmoil in our country in the last several years have shown us what they have believed all along. And what we saw beneath all the Bible quotations and religious talk was something that people outside the church have always suspected: that when it comes right down to it, there's really no difference between people who claim to be Christians and everyone else; that what drives every other human ideology drives us too. That at the end of the day what is most important to Christians and non-Christians alike is one thing: WINNING. And when it comes to winning, we all use the same nasty tactics and strategies, because both Christians and non-Christians most fear the same thing too—LOSING—losing power, losing influence, losing money, losing their way of life, losing their voice, losing their rights. So, when push comes to shove, there's really nothing different about people who claim to be Christian.

What's ironic is that this is kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy. When we fear losing and then lose sight of our unique, God-given mandate as the Christian church, we *lose* our voice, we lose our credibility, we lose our influence. We lose an opportunity to get above politics so we can be the conscience of the nation. This is always what happens when we pledge our allegiance to and follow the kingdoms of this world. The church loses its distinctive voice and we become just another political constituency to be wined, dined, leveraged, and bought. And in the process, we lose the two things that are actually worth fighting for—the gospel and our own souls.

But the church does not exist to win elections or culture wars. And when it picks a political tribe and starts engaging in partisan politics, it alienates half of the population in America that Jesus calls it to reach. The church is about reaching the whole world for Christ, not just the people who look like us and vote like us, but everyone. But we cannot reach people that we demonize and treat as political enemies. And we don't just demonize people outside of our local church, we demonize people sitting in the pew behind us. Too often, we act like other members in our own church who hold different opinions are not real Christians, and that we must separate ourselves from them to protect our political purity and religious righteousness. But according to the New Testament, what *Jesus* said was *most* important, is not our theology, our uniquely articulated doctrines, or the way we baptize or serve communion, or how we order worship in Sunday

morning, but UNITY. But we have traded unity in the church for a desire to be winners in the body politic.

So, looking back over the last several years, the church has missed an unprecedented opportunity to bear witness to the truth of Jesus in the way that it responds to all this political and cultural madness; an opportunity to be a light to the nation, to have a distinctive voice and a different kind of response. As Christians, including you and me, we have missed the mark regarding what the Apostle Paul instructed the early Christians to do when they were also faced with political and cultural madness. He said, if you are a follower of Jesus then you must

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“Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.” (Philippians 2:14-15)

I’ve heard so many Christians talk about how the world is being taken over by the devil, so much so that the prophecies of the book of Revelation are being fulfilled and the end is near. And Paul says: Ok, if you have concerns about your warped culture, if you have concerns about this crooked generation and the loss of your country as you know it, then I have good news. You have an incredible opportunity to make a difference for Jesus in this mess. But you will miss this opportunity and make NO difference if you jump into the political madness and replicate the evil by grumbling, complaining, and arguing like everyone else. But if you can respond differently, if you can respond in a way that reflects the value system of the Kingdom of God, THEN you will shine among them like stars in the sky. The contrast between the way you are responding in faith and the way everyone is reacting in fear will be so obvious that people will stop and stare. Wow! In the midst of the mean and nasty political fighting, we can make a difference for Jesus, but it all starts with the simple command:

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Stop grumbling and arguing with each other.

This whole idea of being different, of being light in darkness, goes back to Jesus. Remember what he says in **Matthew 5:16**, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). He also commands us to love our enemies and to pray for people who persecute us. So, if you are Christian, especially if you are a pastor who is responsible for the spiritual care of others, you have no business participating in the demonization of others, including people that you have never met, don’t know, and don’t have any access to. You have no business attacking, making fun of, ridiculing, harshly judging, or condemning people, *even if you think you are right!* Nor should you glorify, condone, or support this behavior in others, including your political leaders. *This is not the way of Jesus.* And when we let our guard down and start grumbling and arguing like everyone else, we easily get sucked into these evil tactics, dishonor Jesus, and lose the credibility of our witness.

I’ve listened to some Christian pastors and leaders angrily say things like, “I won’t be intimidated anymore! I’m going to boldly stand up for the truth, insist on my right to free speech,

and protect my right to religious liberty,” And they think that the best way to secure a religious win is to use the secular playbook of political strategists by deploying sinful strategies that divide, degrade, demonize, and destroy anyone who has a different view. And I get it. If we are being honest, all of us are tempted to do this, and most of us have made mistakes in this regard. I struggle with this just like you do. But we must remember that God never uses these strategies to change the world, and God never gives us permission to use these strategies to change the world. Furthermore, Jesus never said that our primary goal is to win, to win an argument, to win an election, to win a culture war, to win power, influence, or wealth. And Paul says that the goal is NOT to secure our rights, religious or otherwise. In fact, Paul says that we should be willing to surrender our rights for a greater good.

He says in 1 Corinthians 9, beginning in verse 3, “This is my defense to those who sit in judgement on me . . .” Don’t we, referring to those in Christian ministry, have the **right** to food and drink? Don’t we have the **right** to get married? Don’t we have a right to work and make a living? Don’t we have the same rights as everyone else? Then he says,

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“But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 9:12b)

Did you hear that? Just like Christ, who upon leaving heaven to become incarnate in the man Jesus, gave up his rights, taking on the form of a slave, Paul willingly surrenders his rights for the sake of the gospel. So, the most important thing is not winning anything, it’s about being faithful to the gospel, and if the church is going to make any difference in the world this is the only thing that has ever worked. Neither Jesus or Paul grasped for power and then lorded it over people to get their way. In fact, they taught that this strategy always leads to destruction. Rather, they teach us to humble ourselves in love, to stop insisting on our rights, and to live a life of self-sacrificial service, even if it means that we lose politically, morally, or culturally in the eyes of the world.

If you read the New Testament, this is precisely how Jesus changed the world. It’s how Paul and the apostles changed the world. And this is how *we* are called to change the world.

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 9 to lay out the Christian strategy for accomplishing this goal.

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He says:

Though I am free and belong to no one, *I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

In other words, I’m taking a step back, I’m giving up my rights, and putting myself under those with whom I disagree, submitting to and serving them in love, as a way of influencing them.

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He continues:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

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I can hear some people saying, “Really? This is so wishy washy. This is so lukewarm. This is a watered-down gospel. This is a betrayal of our Christian identity and beliefs to fit in with others. But this is a misreading of this text. What Paul is trying to say here is: **I have learned to build and navigate relationships with people with whom I have nothing in common.** Instead of finding my corner and surrounding myself with people who are just like me, I have learned how to deeply listen to people who are different; to be non-defensive, non-coercive, non-manipulative; to put myself in their shoes, to connect with their experience, to empathize and understand; to value and affirm people's feelings and experience even when it is very different from mine. I have learned to get along with just about everyone by focusing on them; not by focusing on myself, not by insisting that I be heard, not by insisting that I be understood, not by insisting that I am right, not by insisting that I be included, but by focusing on developing deep understanding and compassion with others. And why does he do this? So that people will listen to him when he talks about Jesus and shares the good news of forgiveness, salvation, and new life in Christ—which is THE most important thing. He takes this approach because he was under the law of Christ, and the law of Christ is simple: we are commanded to love others the way that God has loved us in Christ. Period. No exceptions.

You may balk at this and say, “That's way too passive. It will never work.” But this strategy, not the strongman strategy of Rome, the strategy of top-down power and overwhelming force, but the strategy of self-sacrificial love is what changed the world and shaped the entirety of Western civilization. It's the only strategy that has ever truly worked in the long run, and the only strategy that is consistent with the will of God and the realization of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And it is the strategy to which you will be held accountable when you face your maker.

I don't say all of this to beat up one political party or another. This is really not about a particular political party, it is about the tone, posture, and approach of our politics in America today, and it is on both sides. We are called by God to be Christians, not Democrats or Republicans. Nor do I say all of this to get you to withdraw from the political process. Far from it! We love our country because it affords us the many gifts of democracy. It is a privilege to be able to freely speak the truth as we understand it, and we should use that freedom, but when we speak the truth, we are called to do it in love. It's a privilege to vote, and countless sacrifices have been made to give you that right, so vote, every time you have an opportunity vote, but don't vote to make the world more like your political party wants it to be (or to get a better tax break), vote to make the

world more like Jesus wants it to be, more loving and just. It is an honor to elect people to represent us, and we need good Christian men and women to run for office, and maybe that's you. So, we are not talking about withdrawing from the political process. In fact, many of you need to get more involved. But we want to get involved in a different way. Our posture, tone, and approach should reflect that of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And when it does, we treat everyone in the process with dignity, kindness, and respect. We participate in the political process in ways that bear witness to the kingdom of God and honor Jesus.

I want to end with a quote from Tim Keller. It's important to know that I have theological (and probably political) differences with this Pastor, but in the spirit of what I have just preached, I want to lift-up and value one of his ideas as a brother in Christ.

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He says,

“When the church as a whole is no longer seen as speaking to questions that transcend politics, and when it is no longer united by a common faith that transcends politics, then the world sees strong evidence that [the great protest atheists,] Nietzsche, Fried, and Marx were right that religion is really just a cover for people wanting to get their way in the world.” That we are leveraging the idea of God to get our way in the world and give divine legitimation to any strategy we think we need to win.

So, let's resist that temptation and continue to decide that we are not going to do that. That our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus and his kingdom and that we will seek change by following him and doing it His way. Amen.