

## **Challenging the Politics of Division**

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A Pastoral Word to the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland

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First, a confession. For several years in my ordained ministry following seminary, I carefully avoided preaching on most of the controversial issues facing our country. Judging from the silence in my sermons, you would have thought our Lord Jesus would frown on his followers speaking to the political culture of our times, and the Christian gospel has practically nothing to say about how to govern ourselves as a just and democratic society.

The reasons for my silence were neither indecipherable nor noble. In truth, I was scared. I chickened out from saying anything that would rile up the congregants in my small church who represented the diversity of political and social views that the national polls say continue to divide us today. I liked my job, I liked getting paid, and I liked being liked. So, I found creative ways to step around saying anything that would upset a particular voting bloc in my church – be it liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, progressive or traditionalist.

And yet, Jesus himself was “political.” By that I do not mean he aligned himself with a certain party, nor did he propose purely political solutions for the social problems of his day. Jesus was, of course, supremely a spiritual and religious figure in the lineage of the Hebrew prophets before him. But it is undeniable that the life and ministry of our Lord put him in conflict with the political powers and values of his culture. The gospel Jesus and his followers proclaimed had inevitable ramifications for how society was to be organized for the benefit of the people.

The Christian gospel cannot be reduced to a personal soul-saving and life-changing message for individuals alone, and it cannot be cocooned to operate solely within organized religious communities. The gospel impacts all of life, including all political institutions. As the French Catholic poet Charles Peguy once wrote, “Everything begins in mysticism, and ends in politics.”

The current political season is marked by fear, anger, mistrust and division. The values of Christian gospel, however, are characterized by the “fruit of the Spirit” in St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* (5:22-23) The politics of Jesus, no matter what social or economic policies are being espoused or denounced, demand these values undergird both the tone of the political conversation and its proposed outcomes.

Shouldn’t the politics of Jesus move us to judge what our political candidates say about their opponents, how they talk about “others,” and if their economic and social policies are based on the kind of gospel values that St. Paul commended?

If so, then we should talk about these things in church. But given our current sour political climate, how? At the risk of being attacked for being overly simplistic, I humbly offer the following ground

rules. I offer these for both ordained clergy as they preach and for those in the congregation as they listen.

*A guideline for preachers*

- Always preach the gospel. Respect the pulpit; don't view it as your personal political platform.
- Speak as *one* informed witness to Christ's gospel, acknowledging there are other witnesses.
- Remind your listeners that this is the beginning of a conversation you want to have with them, not the end of a needed conversation.
- Show some courage. It's easier in the long run for your pastoral ministry than cowardice.
- Be willing to listen, be willing to change your mind, be willing to repent.

*A word to listeners*

- Cut your preachers some slack. They really are trying to say and do the right thing.
- Acknowledge in yourself that Jesus was both a spiritual and a political teacher.
- Read the cited Scriptures, and have the conversation with God and with others that the preacher is inviting you to have.
- Be willing to listen, be willing to change your mind, be willing to repent.

If our churches in the Diocese of Maryland can put into practice the gospel-infused values of Jesus, then we can show the world another model of political discourse in this divisive season, one based on "striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being." (*Book of Common Prayer, page 417*)