

“Politics and Faith”

September 11, 2016

“Can We Talk? Where Faith and Politics Meet” series

PLAY sound bite from local radio station

We’re not supposed to talk about religion and politics. We consider them “off limits” in casual conversation. Sometimes we avoid them with our closest friends and family because we’re just asking for trouble. We don’t bring up politics in church because we know we don’t all agree on particular issues. It seems easier to avoid those issues, but I don’t think it gets us anywhere. God cares about the stuff we’re dealing with.

My mom wasn’t sure if it was 1980 or 1984. Both were presidential election years. I was either four or eight years old. But what my mom is sure of - and still can’t believe - is that I asked our pastor at the time, “Who are you going to vote for for president?” As you might imagine, my mom was mortified, and I don’t think our pastor gave me an answer.

Frankly, I’m glad he didn’t. Part of this goal of this series is exactly what you see here - Can We Talk? This series is not about which presidential candidate gets your vote or mine - because I won’t tell you either. However, I will say that it’s important and vital that we exercise our right to vote. Make sure that you’re registered to vote and that you take the time to vote in every election.

In your bulletin today is a handout with some of our Social Principles on political responsibility and the separation of church and state. I want you to know how thankful I am that our tradition engages both personal faith in Jesus Christ and social holiness. Social Principles are not church law, but our best effort to engage the world that God made and the world Christ died for. Social Principles help us to think theologically about how we care for God’s creation, how we treat one another, how we respond to issues in our contemporary world.

We start with Scripture as our foundation, but that’s not the end. Each of us is influenced by the tradition of the Christian church over the centuries. Each of us possesses a mind - logic and reason - with which we engage the world. And each of us carries a number of experiences that inform how we respond.

Faith and politics were never separated for Jesus, and they aren’t separated for us either. The faith that we claim matters, and it influences - or at least I hope it influences - how we feel about any social or political issue that we discuss. It doesn’t mean that we come the exact same conclusions about a particular issue.

Dave Lorenz, a member of our congregation, reflected on his work at the Capitol: “Before going to Lansing, I used to think that politicians were either good or bad. I've learned that most of them (like everyone else) show both qualities. There are a few who use their office for personal gain, but most are people who are trying to do the right thing and often with faith-based reasoning. Here's the interesting part. They come up with entirely different and often conflicting solutions based on the same (often faith-based) good intentions.” Friends, our faith makes a difference.

Even saying that, I want you to know that this series brings anxiety for me, and at the same time, I know it's important to engage this as we continue in this time when the divide between political parties and people only seems to get wider and deeper - and with added nastiness. The role of media - whether news channels, talk radio, or social network sites - only seems to exacerbate the divide. Is it too much information? Is it correct? Is it balanced? Is it clear?

I was challenged earlier this year at a workshop with Richard Mouw who has been working in the area of theological ethics for a long time. His challenge to all of us was to consider the phrase “convicted civility.” In world where it seems that those with strong convictions usually aren't very civil, and those who seem to be more civil usually aren't known for having strong convictions, how can we do both better? How can we have strong convictions and be civil to each other?

And Mouw also challenged me to think differently about the role of the church. He said that the local congregation should function as a school of public virtue. Part of what we do as the church is spiritual formation to be faithful in public life. So far as much as we might think that faith and politics don't go together, they absolutely do. Statistics say that at least 50% of people claim that personal faith guides their political views. It's just that we don't want to talk about it.

Now I know that the situation that the apostle Paul was dealing with in Ephesus, Turkey was different than what we experience in the U.S., and yet, his letter may help us to regroup. Paul was talking to church people. And maybe it's a comfort to know that they didn't always get along! Even Paul and Peter had their own disagreements, but ultimately sought to put Jesus first. And in Ephesus, the biggest tension is around how Jews and Gentiles - both who desire to follow Jesus - will come together and serve God together.

For all we know, the church was fairly well-grounded, and yet had the struggle of lifting up Jesus in the midst of the culture around them. In Ephesus, worship of the Greek goddess Artemis was common, so those who were Christ followers were a witness to their community.

Paul's letter to them begins with teaching on doctrine, but goes into practical advice for how they should behave with one another. Now this is the early church, but I found myself convicted when I read Paul's words. How do we - no matter our political leanings, no matter our opinions and convictions - hear Paul's advice?

²⁹Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

³⁰And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption.

³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. ³²Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

Can we talk? Paul's bit about what kind of words we use is clear. And if I'm honest, it's terribly difficult. One scholar says that if we took this to heart, we'd think before we speak more often, and we'd probably speak far less often than we do.

One commentator says, "Church is not a gladiator event" where winning is the goal. It's a community where Christ is lifted up in worship, and we seek to follow him and love him with our heart, soul, mind, and strength - and love one another the way he loves us.

Paul writes to a community in Christ. Community with others requires time to build trust and vulnerability. It requires getting to know one another so that we see each other as fellow human being and build relationships that can endure even in the midst of disagreement. And that's a constant challenge before us - to get involved and be involved that we might grow together in faith.

There's a lot of talk these days about "third spaces" and "third places" - those places apart from home and work where people connect and cultivate relationships. Many times, those are coffee shops or bars or any place where people spend time together, talk, and get to know each other. How can we make the time to find those spaces to engage one another in faithful ways?

Paul is clear about his expectations and desire for the Ephesians. He tells them that the way they communicate has everything to do with their witness to the world. That's a powerful word to us as we engage complex issues that become very personal for us, get us in our gut, and get our hearts racing a little faster.

We can argue with each other faithfully if we can agree on how to do it. The card you received today is a great start. To serve God and one another better, can we seek to:

Have an open mind?

Be respectful, listen, seek to understand?

Stay on topic?

Challenge the idea, not the person?

Can we be listeners? Can we show respect? Are we willing to have those face-to-face conversations - sometimes difficult, and yet meaningful - so that we're lifting up the importance of a community that is built on Jesus - our cornerstone, our solid rock, our Lord and Savior?

If you and I are looking for a Savior and Redeemer anywhere else except in God through Jesus Christ, we better look again. There is only One who can bring peace, hope, and salvation, and he engaged the religious and political system of his day so clearly and so boldly that it got him nailed to the cross. And his call to us to love God and love neighbor is clear. Neighbor applies to those of different political affiliations or opinions on social issues, too.

I'm convinced that our willingness to listen, to talk, to share, to be vulnerable, to get to know each other is a powerful witness to the world in a time of great divisiveness and polarization. I don't think that Christians have an "in" when it comes to helpful conversation, but my hope for myself and for you is that we consider how our words - whether spoken, written, or shared through social media - build up or destroy. I pray that we would put on humility even as we live our faith boldly.

And even more, I pray that we'd take Paul's words to heart. It's not just about making sure that foul language doesn't come from us or keep going from us; it's even more about changing the way we communicate so that our words build up and encourage others.

Can we talk? With God's help, I know we can.

Thanks be to God! Amen.