



“Faithful Politics: Civil Discourse”

1 Peter 3:15-16

September 20, 2020

Some of you know that, among my earliest professional aspirations, after professional basketball player, was the goal of being President of the United States. It all began in Mrs. Gardner’s fifth-grade class when we were asked to divide into three tables, one for each of the candidates in the 1992 presidential campaign, and prepare for a debate. I watched as my classmates divided equally between the tables supporting George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. With the overconfidence of a ten-year-old political junkie, I marched to the Ross Perot table and took my seat. All alone. Not exactly sure how to pronounce my candidate’s last name. We had fifteen minutes to review newspaper clippings and magazine articles on the table before the debate would begin. What happened next is a bit of a blur, but things must have gotten a little intense because I ended up exiled in the hallway outside the classroom. Mrs. Gardner called it a “cool down period.” Apparently, I had not allowed my classmates time to speak and argued a bit too passionately and loudly the merits of Perot’s agenda. In my defense, I offer this important detail: by the end of the debate, three other students had joined me at the Perot table. Of course, despite my spirited support, Ross Perot lost the election—my first of many political defeats including my own run for vice president of student council in the seventh grade. Still, my interest in the political realm has persisted even as my vocational path took a different turn.

I am, first, a follower of Jesus Christ. I am a preacher of the gospel. I am a pastor. In those roles, reflecting on the call of Holy Scripture and particularly the Reformed tradition in which we at Second Presbyterian Church stand, I want to speak this week and next about political engagement among people of faith. Next week, we’ll turn to the question of “why” we engage.

This Sunday, we consider the “how” question—the tone and tactics of our engagement. Often, I find myself wishing Mrs. Gardner was in charge and would give all of us an extended cool down period. I am deeply concerned about the absence of genuine and honest dialogue between people of different perspectives. I’m concerned about the startling lack of reverence for the dignity of others or respect for truth beyond our opinions. I’m concerned about how electronic methods of communication have enabled disembodied pronouncements that leave no room for response, conversation, or accountability. I am concerned about how these realities have led us to polarized extremes, setting up camp, and preparing for battle. Several years ago, I read an essay on the United States Senate appropriately titled, “The Empty Chamber.”¹ The author describes how legislators most often stand to make speeches in an empty room, speaking only to CSPAN’s cameras and the recording secretaries. The image of passionately lecturing to an empty room may be the most appropriate metaphor for the state of discourse in our time.

As we approach an election that has been described in apocalyptic terms by commentators and politicians across the ideological spectrum, we must place a priority on our God-given call as people of Christian faith in such a time as this. I am convinced that this call is to give faithful witness that is not held captive to partisan ideology but offers an important prophetic voice in the public square. To be silent is to neglect the clear call of scripture. To engage as those seeking a faithful path forward it is to enter into difficult and transformative conversations that might bring hope in a time of too much despair.

We begin with the call to civil discourse. Discourse is just another word for communication,

both written and spoken. As Christians, I trust we can agree that words matter. The way we speak to one another and the way we speak of God makes a powerful difference in our lives and in our world. We seek to follow Jesus, described in the Gospel of John as the “word made flesh.” God’s own message to us in human form.

Words matter because they are powerful tools for building up or breaking down. Words matter because they shape our convictions and inevitably our actions. The letter to the Ephesians is all about how Christians are to live together in community. Last week, we read general instructions to speak the truth in love, to grow up in faith, to embody unity in practice. At the end of the letter, which we heard this morning, the Apostle’s language becomes even more direct. The passage we heard this morning reads like a list of commands. And the list centers on our use of language. “Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, only what is useful for building up, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” It is easy for us to observe how neglected these commands are in the world “out there,” the world of politics, media, and social networks. And I fervently wish that our leaders and most prominent voices would follow these instructions of scripture.

But I do feel compelled to remind us all that these words were written to the church. Their intended audience is people exactly like you and me, who are trying to follow Jesus in the world and live as people of integrity and faith. We are the ones who are called to put away falsehood and practice kindness and speak words that give grace to others. So, before we criticize the tone of the conversation “out there,” let’s spend a little time focused on our own discourse. What if we were to choose our words with attention to the values outlined in these verses? What if we were to listen with open hearts and minds and speak with genuine compassion and honesty? There is no debating that civility is severely lacking in our nation. But civil discourse begins in our own speech, in the words we use with and about one another. It

extends to the words we accept from others; what if we refused to listen to hateful and dishonest rhetoric, even when it affirms our perspective? What if we held our leaders accountable to standards of honesty and kindness? What if we began with those with whom we agree? What if we refused to support a politics centered on insulting the “other side?”

I know what many of you are thinking. This is impossible. We have the politicians we have. We are where we are. You are certainly right. Here we are, in a culture of hateful rhetoric and shouting voices that leave no room for listening or genuine dialogue. And yet, if people of faith cannot envision another reality, then we have abdicated the core of our faith in pursuit of power, influence, wealth, or whatever idol is most appealing to us. You see, a *different* reality is what we are all about!

The letter we call First Peter was written to Christians living in exile. The churches in Asia Minor were suffering alienation and persecution under the authoritarian rule of the Roman Empire. The faith communities were filled with fear and struggling with their role in a society hostile to their convictions. In this context, the words of First Peter offer another kind of command. “Always be ready,” the author writes, “to describe the hope that is in you.” Always be prepared to be a witness for your faith, even when doing so causes risk and danger. But the instruction does not stop there, nor should we. “Yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Be prepared to passionately provide your perspective, and to do it respectfully and reverently.

Now, I do happen to believe that this approach to civil discourse is more effective than the strategy of shouting louder than your so-called enemies. I do believe that there is immense practical value to this kind of intentional dialogue grounded in respect. But that is not the primary reason that these instructions appear in scripture. As frustrating as this will be to those of us immersed in expectations of effectiveness, the metric of judgment for followers of Jesus Christ is faithfulness, not success. The wonderful Quaker author Parker Palmer suggests, “When faithfulness

is our standard, we are more likely to sustain our engagement with tasks that will never end: doing justice, loving mercy, and calling the beloved community into being.”ⁱⁱ

Our call is to see every part of our lives, including our political engagement, through the lens of faith and the filter of scripture. This is true not only in the forming of our perspectives and opinions but also in *how* we engage others. Through the lens of faith, we see not enemies but humans created in the image of God. Through the lens of faith, we cannot ignore the suffering of others as if it is not our problem. Through the lens of faith, we cannot tolerate hateful rhetoric that demonizes and denigrates others. John Calvin, whose writing and theology gave shape to what became the Reformed tradition and Presbyterian Church, wrote powerfully on this topic—”The Lord commands us to do ‘good unto all,’ universally, a great part of whom, estimated according to their own merits, are very undeserving; but here the Scripture assists us with an excellent rule...that we must not regard the...merit of others, but must consider the image of God in them, to which we owe all possible honor and love.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Please don’t think I’m naïve. I’m not waiting for calls from campaign managers eager to implement appreciation for the divine image in your opponent as a political strategy. I’m no politician. I’m a follower of Jesus Christ, a preacher, a pastor. This is the ground on which I stand to urge us all to a different standard, a higher ethic of responsibility. To let the sacredness of the other impact our interactions. That is reverence.

Perhaps you’ve been in a heated exchange...or two or three...in recent weeks. Let me offer a spiritual practice to try the next time you feel the temperature rising. Practice the pause. Stop mid-sentence or before responding and simply breathe. Pray. Picture the person standing before you as a creation of Almighty

God, not a mindless moron. And then proceed with gentleness and reverence. I’ve found that this practice is a bit like letting go in the middle of a tug-o-war.

Marilynne Robinson is my favorite writer. In a recent essay, she offers these words to which I cling as we absorb the latest insult, half-truth, or fearful scenario. Robinson writes, “We still have every *potential* for good as we ever had...We are still creatures of singular interest and value, agile of soul as we have always been...To value one another is our greatest safety, and to indulge in fear and contempt is our gravest error.”^{iv}

I need those words right now; perhaps you do too. We’re forty-four days from an election. There has been too much contempt, too much fear, not enough valuing of one another. It won’t be easy to change course, but as followers of Jesus Christ, I’m not sure how we can live faithfully and ignore the call to live differently. Every potential for good is still within us. It’s time to act on that potential. It begins, I believe, with reverence.

May it be so in our lives and in our church. Amen.

ⁱ George Packer, “The Empty Chamber: Just How Broken is the Senate?” *The New Yorker*, August 9, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Josey-Bass, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion III.7*

^{iv} Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.