

Transcending Politics

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I had planned to sort of eulogize John the Baptist this morning. I was going to tell you about everything John had accomplished in his life, what he stood for, what he wouldn't stand for, and about what a great influence John the Baptist has had on me personally, on my faith. But I know that the thing that is frontmost on many of our hearts and minds this morning (certainly on mine) is yesterday's assassination attempt on former President Trump.

For those of you who may have missed the news, a gunman opened fire on Mr. Trump at a rally in Pennsylvania. Mr. Trump was struck in the ear, but—thank God—he's OK. Unfortunately, one other man at the rally was killed. Two other men were seriously wounded. The gunman was also killed by the Secret Service. That's about all we know, regarding the details, at the moment. But I think all of us also know and feel that this is terrible news for our country, terrible news for this election, terrible news for those of us who continue to dare to hope that there is a possibility of healing the increasingly violent political polarization that is diving our country. This is going to make everything worse. OR—dare I hope?—maybe there's an opportunity here to turn things around?

When I arrived here five years ago to become your senior minister, I began occasionally, in my preaching and praying, to intentionally include “political” material. There is no such thing--*no such thing*—as an apolitical Christianity. A Christianity or a church that attempts to avoid all political issues, that attempts to avoid offending the political sensibilities of its members or neighbors by making the mere mention of politics taboo is avoiding the fullness of the Gospel's call to engage with the realities and injustices of our world. When we do this, we neglect our prophetic role—crying out for justice, for peace, and for the almost forgotten common good.

Religious values are political values and politics are often wrapped up in or reacting to religion, and therefore abandoning political discussion forces a church to abandon its duty to participate in the most important discussions of our time. Imagine a church saying that the discussion of religious values is better left to the politicians. The Church should remain silent on issues like the morality of our leaders, mass murder in our schools, providing healthcare, defining marriage, addressing poverty. It's ridiculous, but it's the unintended stance of churches who attempt to avoid anything “political.”

There's no such thing as apolitical Christianity, but that doesn't mean descending into the muck of politics. Christianity has always been a path of transcending politics, getting past our worst political instincts, and coming together across very real divides. The Apostle Paul wrote to the first Christians in Gaul, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” In Christ, Paul is saying, we do not ignore the world or the social and political differences between us. In Christ, we transcend those differences, not by ignoring them, but by creating a church where—against all the political and social norms of the world around us—we gather, we sing, and we eat—all of us at the same table—class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship be damned—all of us together. That church in Gaul wasn't ignoring politics, they were defying politics. They were transcending politics and creating something new.

So, when I arrived here five years ago, I began intentionally and gently, inserting not political opinions but political reality into my preaching and praying. And it was hard on some of us. Because it was hard to hear even the mention of politics without thinking that this crazy long-haired guy is bringing up politics in order to try to force me to accept his politics. What I am hoping to do is to open up enough political honesty between us that we can learn to love one another despite very real political differences and disagreements, where we can learn to respect someone different than us even when we can't accept their opinion. Imagine if I said to you, “I love you—BUT only because I don't know everything about you. If you spoke freely about your thoughts on—let's say—Joe Biden, I would probably stop loving you. But as long as you keep your mouth shut, I really do love you.” Would you believe me? Is that the kind of place we want our churches to be? Is that the kind of love we want to practice?

The very reasonable fear, of course, is that if politics come out in the open, we'll become as profoundly divided in church as we are outside of it. And, yes, that's a risk. But in the rest of the country, in the world outside these walls, politics and the discussion of politics isn't going to go away--*ever*. And our

culture desperately needs local, in-person communities of healing and restoration that are willing to do the hard work of loving one another across very real divides and differences. Shouldn't churches be at the forefront of that political movement?

Imagine if in every town and city across this country there were these historic spiritual communities with lots of social capital and a respected moral voice holding community events, volunteer opportunities, and services where Americans could learn the countercultural values of loving and respecting and maybe even needing someone who is different from myself. Jane is a never-Trumper, but my kids love going to Vacation Bible School with her, and we couldn't do it without her. Bob is way out there into some lefty stuff that just isn't for me, but when I was sick, he brought me gluten-free zucchini muffins, and they were good. Who's going to make that vision a reality if not us, if not the Church? And that vision, if we believe in it, requires us to talk regularly, respectfully and lovingly, about politic reality and to see one another fully in order to love one another fully. The devil's in the details, of course, and it wouldn't be easy, and there'd be growing pains for sure, but if not us, then who?

The price of our inaction is pretty clear: more violent rhetoric, violent speech, and violent actions as we lash out against our enemies. This kind of conflict doesn't just go away. It continues to escalate unless it is somehow transformed. Where would you rather live? In a world where you were empowered to revile your enemies at the price of devolving into political instability and violence? Or a world where you were truly free to love those who were truly different than you with the benefit of an imperfect but evolving sense of the common good?

Beloved, our country needs us. Our community needs us to be bold and courageous. It's easy to decry violence. It's hard to respond to the deep-seated polarization and loneliness that are driving people further and further apart—that's driving us to extremes, to hate and to violence. We can't overcome this division by ignoring it. We're going to have to turn around, face reality, face one another with charity and love, and learn through Christ to transcend the differences. If not us, then who?