

Disciples as Citizens

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. It's great to be with you all, and I bring you greetings from Church of the Resurrection on Capitol Hill. I feel like I've been hanging out with Advent folks all week, and I officiated the wedding yesterday morning for Allie Phillips and Matt Barnwell, for those of you that know them.

And it was a fantastic service, fantastic wedding. So great to be with them and great to be with you all this morning at the Brooklyn service and here tonight. I was thinking the last time I preached, it was part of a series at Church of the Resurrection on love, and everyone else got to preach on topics like dating and marriage.

And my topic was celibacy in a church full of young single people. And here I am up again, and this time preaching in Washington, D.C. on politics and Christianity and citizenship.

So I don't know how this keeps happening. My wife will say that, tell me that I choose this. So all I can say is it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Let me open us with a word of prayer. Father, Father, be with us all this evening as we listen for your voice. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

[1 : 29] Amen. So perhaps some of you saw the report that came out from the Pew Research Center earlier this year, based on a survey that it had conducted, one of the largest surveys that it had ever conducted, to examine the extent of our political polarization and to see just how deep it goes.

And one question on that survey in particular has been asked every year for several decades, and it perhaps gets at it more than anything else.

It asks Americans whether they would be upset if their child married somebody from a different political party. And when they asked this question in 1960, 5% of Americans expressed a negative reaction to their child marrying somebody from a different political party.

By 2010, 40% said they would be upset. It used to be, of course, that race or religion were the two biggest determinants when it came to marriage.

But, of course, over the same period of time, the percentage of interracial marriages has increased significantly, as have interfaith marriages. So what we're seeing is really a huge shift in our social fabric.

[2 : 50] Today, politics has become far more central than faith when it comes to determining not only one's spouse, but one's broader friendships and communities. Now, I think we need to affirm at the outset that one's political commitments matter and that they're connected to a much broader web of values and commitments that we have.

But studies, I think, such as this do raise some important questions. How is it that our political identities today have become so much more decisive than any other aspect of our identities? Why is it that the Christian community appears to exhibit similar degrees of antagonism and polarization as exists in the broader culture?

And perhaps most fundamentally a question that I'd like for us to consider briefly here this morning, is there anything distinctive about how Christians should engage in politics?

And if so, what would that look like? So, because we're considering these questions in a place like Church of the Advent, I'm going to make a few assumptions.

[4 : 05] The first assumption is that politics is more than simply who you vote for. Politics is a comprehensive process in which people with different views seek the common good together.

What this means, of course, is that since Christianity is concerned with human flourishing, Christianity is inescapably political. We heard it in our readings this evening.

In Isaiah, we hear God's reaction to injustice being done and his call to political rulers to enact true justice.

In Psalm 47, God is praised as the supreme king to whom current earthly political leaders should submit. In Mark's gospel, Jesus comes onto the scene as an heir of Israel's greatest politician, King David, and he holds up an image of the most powerful political leader of the day, Caesar Augustus, and subversively suggests that Caesar's days are numbered.

The second assumption that I'm going to make is that the gospel that Jesus preached is not a privatized, Jesus and me, get saved so I can go to heaven when I die, kind of gospel.

[5 : 28] We will simply take it as assumed that the death and resurrection of Jesus signaled the inbreaking of God's reign into our world and therefore that God's vision for the world should find expression today in everything from art to architecture to business to journalism and also to politics.

God's kingdom is not fully here. God's kingdom is not fully here.

It's broken in, but it has not yet been fully realized. Jesus has not yet returned in person to rule. And therefore God orders and affirms earthly caretaker governments to enact justice that is provisional and partial.

Earthly governments are not Christian, nor can they be. Triumphant attempts to make earthly regimes in any way directly identified with God's rule is a political mistake, and it's also a theological mistake.

But if we acknowledge a necessary gap between God's kingdom and earthly politics, then we have to ask, what should we expect of earthly governments?

[6 : 57] How do we translate a kingdom vision into earthly rule? Now, fully answering this question might take more than one sermon.

It might take more than a few sermon series. And the reality is that for those who come from evangelical backgrounds, evangelicals have an underdeveloped theology of what this should look like.

And it means that, therefore, we will need to draw on other traditions in order to fully answer this question. One way of thinking about this, however, just very briefly, would be to draw on the work of the theologian Karl Barth, who argued that we work towards governments that are analogous to God's kingdom.

An analogy is where you compare two things that are different. They're not the same in order to emphasize certain similarities. In this respect, then, we should work toward degrees of correspondence between earthly governments and God's kingdom.

So earthly governments will never be God's kingdom, and we should not expect them to be.

However, as a result of the church's proclamation of the gospel, we believe that governments can learn what their relatively bounded role can be during this period between Christ's ascension and his return.

[8 : 32] In other words, we believe that our New Testament lesson from Philippians 2, verse 9 is true. Therefore, God has exalted Jesus and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow.

This means that everyone, including political rulers and political regimes, will eventually bow their knee to the Lordship of Christ. Now, of course, we are quick to affirm that this will be fully and completely true in the age to come, but not just in the age to come.

As with every other area of life, we believe that God's rule breaks into history now, and that we should therefore expect to see glimpses, anticipations of that future in the way that governments rule today.

It's why 4th century Christians were not surprised by the eventual conversion of the Roman Empire, of the Roman Emperor.

They weren't surprised by his conversion. In fact, they were so confident in the gospel, they expected it. But this means that Christians engage in politics aware of a deep tension, a tension that is constant and inescapable.

[10 : 07] We put our best efforts towards creating the political conditions that lead to human flourishing in everything from human trafficking to poverty to the family, even as we remember the complexities of the issues, the limitations of our perceptions, and that even the best political achievements are highly fragile and provisional until Christ returns.

So, in light of these tensions, how might Christians move forward, seeking to translate God's kingdom into the messiness of earthly politics?

And I want to briefly suggest three things. First, I want to suggest that we start by simply allowing the liturgy that we practice here, every Sunday, to shape and inform us politically.

And the reason we must allow the liturgy of the church to shape us politically is because, if we don't, the liturgy of the state will.

It's important to remember that nation states always use liturgy to build cohesion and to shape the desires of its citizens, and the United States is no different.

[11 : 29] We have liturgies that begin shaping citizens from a very young age. We take young children and we have them start the school day with an exercise in formation, by putting their hands over their hearts and pledging allegiance to America, as represented by the flag.

Anytime we get large groups of people together for sporting events in stadiums, we start liturgically by singing about America. I remember I had a friend of mine visiting from England.

I took him to a nationals game, and at the beginning of the game, we stood up to sing the national anthem. And he said, he said, are we going to do this right now? I said, yeah, absolutely.

He said, this isn't just reserved for special events like the Olympics. I said, no, this happens before pretty much every game in every stadium. in America. And, uh, he said, you Americans are so hardcore.

Every spring, our city is flooded with yellow school buses, out of which poor eighth graders from across the country who have been brought on a pilgrimage to the nation's capital.

[12 : 47] They will gaze at saint-like statues of the founding fathers. They will hear stories about the agreements that occurred like miracles at the Constitutional Convention.

They will climb the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a structure that was intentionally designed to look and feel like a temple. And they will gaze in silent contemplation at our martyred president and read his words engraved on the stone walls.

Now, understand that my intent here is not to make a critique, but simply to highlight that politics and liturgy always go together.

A political vision always relies on liturgies to shape people's desires, ultimately hoping that people will love something enough to die for it.

But if it's sometimes easy to miss the liturgy that's embedded in the state's politics, it's also sometimes easy to miss the politics that are embedded in the church's liturgy.

[13 : 57] So let's think about what happens here each Sunday when you come to church. First of all, you have to get dressed.

Either it's in the morning, you have to get out of bed, or you have to stop whatever you're doing in the afternoon to come to church in order to worship. So, well done.

Now, why do we do this? Why don't we just stay at home and listen to podcasts of sermons? Or watch services streaming over the internet in the comfort of our pajamas?

Perhaps we should ask that of the people who come here to Washington, D.C. to gather on the National Mall for political rallies. Why do they make all that effort?

Why don't they just stay at home and post things on Facebook? Because gathering together makes a public statement.

[15 : 02] It is a form of communal witness. And so with church, simply showing up to gather with other Christians is a form of communal witness.

We even opened up this evening with our own political pledge. What's the acclamation that we start with every Sunday? The celebrant comes up and begins by saying, Blessed be God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And what do the people say? And blessed be his kingdom. Now and forever. We are here this evening to bless and affirm and center ourselves on God's kingdom.

Or consider our liturgy later in the service, when we come to the table each Sunday for the Eucharist. There we enact and experience a common meal that is very different from the meals that occur in our daily life out in the world.

Out in the world, some people go to expensive restaurants, other people go to inexpensive restaurants, and others cannot afford to go to restaurants at all.

[16 : 14] In general, these groups do not share table fellowship together with each other over a meal. But every Sunday, Christians come to a table at which Jesus is the host, which we are

reminded is a foretaste of the meals that we will enjoy together in the age to come.

And as we come up, regardless of class, or background, or race, or income, we stand or kneel in exactly the same posture together, bringing nothing apart from outstretched hands to receive.

And we might ask, what are the political, or social, or economic implications of communion?

And if we want the world to at least partially reflect the goodness of God's kingdom, how might we extend what is happening at communion to our neighborhoods? Or to our city?

Making these kinds of connections will require creativity and wisdom and prudence. We may find that certain Christian concerns don't have any obvious political traction.

[17:40] We may find that perspectives that emerge do not always line up neatly with party politics as they are currently conceived. We may often find that there's not simply one answer.

But because it is not easy, then while we need to start by being shaped by the church's liturgy, we need to go even further.

And thus, the second suggestion I would make is that as people who are being formed in the narrative of God's kingdom, we also seek to talk about these things with other Christians, including, and even especially, those with whom we disagree politically.

Now, it can be dangerous in a city like this, I realize. We may have to find some catacombs somewhere where we can hold those discussions with impunity. But we need to have our thinking shaped by the broader community of Christians.

And because this can be difficult, we'll need to proceed with great care and love and humility. We'll need to learn to communicate our views with gentleness and be open to being wrong.

[18:52] But the world is actually looking for models of how to do this. Our shared commitment to Jesus Christ means that Christians ought to be able to have better conversations about politics and justice than the rest of the world.

And the final consideration is this. We should seek to ground our broader political reflections on local hands-on involvement.

The church should always seek to be incarnational in its witness. It changes a debate, and it changes us, if we are discussing immigration in the context of knowing and caring for immigrants. It changes our debates about poverty and how to make things better if we are relationally engaged with those who are economically disadvantaged. A few years ago, I was having a conversation with a friend of mine in Georgia.

And he was telling me about his church and about the after-school tutoring program that his church had started. He told me that his was a politically conservative congregation, and most people had very defined views about things like immigration and undocumented workers.

[20:12] But they started an after-school tutoring program, he said, in part to help low-income kids in their neighborhood with their schoolwork. He said, to their complete surprise, the after-school tutoring program grew like crazy.

And before too long, it was filled with hundreds of kids. And it became this major ministry of their church. Most of the kids lived nearby, and as the members of the congregation started working with these kids, they got to know their families.

And they began to love these kids and their families, and some of the families started coming to church. The complicating factor, however, was that most of these kids were Hispanic or Latino, and many of them were almost certainly undocumented.

And my friend told me, we don't know what to do. Most of us believe certain things about immigration, and we also love these kids and their families.

And he said, our church is having conversations about justice in politics that we never had before. Now, I think it is safe to say that the members of this church have not suddenly ditched their political views, nor should they have.

[21:44] And it's safe to say that the very real and legitimate questions around immigration did not suddenly become any less complicated. But let me ask you this.

Where else in America can you find conservative, wall-building, red-state Christians worshipping side-by-side with undocumented immigrants, caring for their kids, helping them graduate from high school so they can go to college, and struggling mightily to work out the politics of that?

That only happens in the church. If, as it is sometimes noted, that states are the laboratories for federal politics, the church is the laboratory for God's political vision.

The church is God's agent for change. The church is the place where we strive to embody what we hope the world will one day be.

And if we commit ourselves to that, then Christians just might have something distinctive to contribute as citizens. Amen.

[23 : 12] Amen.