

“SO WE’RE GOING INTO POLITICS”

Ephesians 1:15-23

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

Just when we thought we were done worrying about Thanksgiving discussions about religion and politics with our families, now the preacher is imperiling us again. Religion and politics in one sermon! But not in the conventional sense.

Rather, on this final Sunday of the church calendar, I want to say how much I’ve come to hear why mixing politics and religion can be *good news*. And I know of no better day to proclaim this good news than today, on Reign of Christ Sunday. Today we gather to join our voices with the whole people of God, in order to shout joyfully from the mountaintops our most revolutionary and subversive claim about Jesus Christ: that he is seated at God’s right hand, as Paul tells the Ephesians, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (Eph. 1:21). This is the day when we recognize how the significance of God’s story for us is not only cosmic and global, but specific and local. Through the ages, the last thing the church reminds itself of, the last line of our story, is this: “the name of Jesus is above every name, not only in this age, but in the age to come.”

Today, we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord, not merely in a general sense, but in a very concrete, political sense. Yes, we affirm with gusto that Jesus is Lord of all creation, Lord of the solar system, the Milky Way, Lord of every solar flare and asteroid belt and dwarf star and gamma ray and expanse so mind-bending we can’t fathom. And even though it was recently demoted from planet status, Jesus is also Lord of Pluto. But Jesus is also Lord of our history. He is the King of all the kings and queens, President of presidents, Governor of governors, Mayor of mayors, Sheriff of sheriffs, Magistrate of magistrates...Student Body President of student body presidents. Paul says, God has put all these officials under Jesus’ feet. So, Jesus is not only Lord of the cosmos, Jesus is also Lord of the crown and the capital. Jesus is not only Lord of the universe. Jesus is also Lord of our states and cities, our townships and hamlets. And that is why he was and is a threat to the powers. Jesus was and is very political. Remember, they didn’t crucify Jesus because he was such a loving person, but because he was a king whose kingdom clashed with worldly kingdoms.

In my second year of seminary, I took a class called “Life and Work of the Pastor,” the notebook for which I still keep beside my desk. The professor was also the pastor of this church from 1964-1984, Cecil Sherman. The third lecture of the class was entitled, “About Going into Politics.” Those of you who knew Cecil will not be surprised to hear that this lecture came before the ones on leadership, church growth, church administration, how to do weddings and funerals, etc. Cecil emphasized politics at the beginning because he knew from a lifetime of experience that the church is a political assembly. He was trying to prepare his students to navigate the risks of ministry. In my notes, I recovered his striking question to us, “You’re going into politics. Are you prepared to live in this environment?”

The nature of the lecture was the seminary version of a college weed-out class. You want to get into med school? Let's see how you like organic chemistry! A seasoned and accomplished pastor gave us the long view. Do you want to be a pastor? Then be warned, you're going into politics!

Now, to be clear, when I say politics here, I don't mean partisanship. I've also been a student of Peter Storey, the Methodist bishop of South Africa, and Nelson Mandela's prison chaplain. In a personal interview, he once told me, "If I've heard it once [from pastors] I've heard it a thousand times: 'You know this congregation is pretty divided between Democrats and Republicans so I have to be very careful what I say.' ...That sentence makes no sense," he said. "What does the political affiliation of the people in the pew have anything to do with what [the preacher] says? Surely that is the last thing that should bother [the preacher]. He should be interested in what God says, and where Jesus' affiliation is at any given moment."

That is what I strive to do here, having been entrusted with this pulpit. When times come for me to speak in the wake of specific events, I am not concerned with the "right" or "left," but with right and wrong. The questions I ask, with the Scriptures before me, are, "What is right?" and "What is true?"

Then again, though partisanship is beneath us, politics is not. Paul says God has raised Jesus far above all rule and authority. But Paul does not say Jesus is *far removed*. From the beginning of Scripture, we see God sending people into face-to-face encounters with rulers and authorities. Remember all the way back as early as Moses, God says, "Moses, I want you to go to Pharaoh, and I want you to tell him, 'Let my people go.' I don't want you to send it in a letter. I want you to go right up the steps of his royal palace, and speak to Him face to face, and say, *Let my people go*."

God raised politicians to lead his people, Saul, David, and Solomon, all Kings. They had their weaknesses, and God sent them prophets to walk alongside them and help them, to find the truth, so that they could lead the people in God's will and way.

One of my favorite preacher-prophet-politician stories comes from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah, who was never shy of coming face-to-face with a politician, goes up to the ruler, Pashhur, and calls him a terrorist. Then Pashhur throws him into dungeon, into the stocks, and says, "How do you like that, Jeremiah?" Then, once Jeremiah has served his term, he marches right back up the stairs, straight up to Pashhur, and says, "As I was saying, you're a terrorist!"

And how can we forget the ways Jesus came face-to-face with the rulers and the authorities of his time, how he engaged the powers that be, whether it was the Pharisees or the Scribes, or whether it was the ruler Herod, or Governor Pilot, who wielded his authority to crucify. How can we forget that Jesus' death was a political death, capital punishment?

But now, God has placed Jesus at God's right hand, which, as Martin Luther said, means "everywhere." Now, all of these rulers and authorities are under His feet.

In its original sense, “politics” doesn’t refer merely to the halls of power, to elections and electioneering, to representatives and statecraft and all the rest. No, in its original sense, to say “politics” is to speak of cities and citizens. Politics comes from the word *polis*, which means “city” or “community.” So, *politics* has to do with the ways people interact with one another for the common good. Politics names the way we arrange our lives to attend to the things that build community. I could just as well have titled this sermon, “So We’re Going into Community,” it just wouldn’t have been as much fun.

But remember this. Never forget this. The earliest Christians knew something that we tend to forget. When they baptized one another, the earliest Christian confession was, “Jesus is Lord.” Now, that is a very polite but direct way of saying, “Caesar is not.” Think about this: when someone is baptized, we can say, in a sense, they are going into politics, because the very first thing they say is, “Jesus is Lord.”

So, brothers and sisters, fellow politicians, this means that we have political duties to live up to. The first is to live in the knowledge that Jesus really is Lord, and no one else. So, it should be a sign of our growth in Christ that our partisan grudges, over the course of a faith-lifetime, begin to calcify and fall off.

One of the signs of vitality of a Christian community is not so much that Democrats and Republicans can come to the same place and get along with one another, but that those who, in a former life, were definitely Democrat on this side, or definitely Republican on this side, have come together, and these identities begin to fade, and something new comes into being. And it is something new that could only be made possible because we are following Christ, who is Lord. That is a duty that we have, and that we should attend to in this place.

We also have a duty to never hide our faith, but to speak it in our homes, to our children, to our friends, and with our enemies. Not to relegate our voices to the margins, but to proclaim the truth we know, in the public square, knowing that if we don’t speak up for truth, justice, goodness, and decency, others will fill that space, precisely with the kinds of vitriol and hatred that we’ve seen in recent years.

Another duty that we have as politicians is, if any one of us ever does discern a call to pursue elected office, we should do so as my former professor, Stanley Hauerwas, likes to say, “Like porcupines reproduce, very carefully.”

I’m aware of the current mayor of the city of Davis, California. His name is Rob Davis—appropriately named. During his campaign, he snuck away from his campaign staff to write an article to be published in the newspaper. It was entitled, “I’m Going to Disappoint You.” The reason I am going to disappoint you, he said, is because you project your hopes and dreams onto me, and I can’t fulfil them, and I can’t save you. So, I’m telling you now, “I care about you, but I’m going to disappoint you.”

A further duty that we have is this – not to get caught up in the drama of our time, the *pathos* of our time, not to get caught up in the despair, or false hopes and dreams, but to stay rooted and

grounded in the love of the gospel. Attentive to one another, looking for the ways that Christ is Lord in our midst, and in measurable ways that we can see in our own local communities.

...Now all of these duties are grounded in the gospel. In Jesus Christ, God has given us an enormous amount of power. Paul calls it, “the immeasurable greatness of his power,” and this power is... for you! “For the church” (Eph. 1:22).

So, let’s come back to the real definition of politics that has to do with building up a community, and come to recognize the immeasurable greatness of God’s power already being shared with us.

What is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power here?

- We see it happening here in the grandeur of public worship...
- From the hanging of the green, or the Pentecost kites flying overhead, to the dedication of a child, or the voice of Lottie Moon, or the elegance of the postlude
- We hear it in the voice cracking in the reading of Scripture or the praying of the dedicatory prayer...
- In the usher smiling and welcoming us to the sanctuary...
- In the acolytes bringing light from the darkness...
- We see it in those with a servant’s heart, feeding the homeless, nurturing at-risk children, going heart first into local prisons to share the gospel...
- We see it in a journey to Cuba, in the dancing in the street, or the repairing of a labyrinth...
- We see God’s immeasurable power demonstrated in the church as we gather to break bread and share fried chicken and scurry to get the last piece of pumpkin pie from the dessert bar...
- We see the vastness of God’s political power in the volunteer who cradles an infant in the nursery, while her parents attend worship.
- As well, we see it in the work of our choir members, who—knowing a good we hold in common is music’s power to reveal God’s presence to us—work hard every week to share that power with us.

I proclaim this message with you today because I know what it’s like to have my heart constantly troubled by what’s going on in the world, and to get lost in the news and the events of every day, and to feel like you have no control, to feel like you have no power to change anything. You’re just one person in the universe, and what difference can you make? I remember going through a time in my life where I just got lost in this despair—several years ago, but it did go on for years. Festering in the flotsam and jetsam of the world, aware of all the suffering around me, of all those in power who use their power for their own gain, their own advantage, but then becoming a cynic about it all. Being consumed with it all can really sink you. It darkens your days, and your life is ruled more by despair. Then, all of a sudden, Jesus is not Lord of your life, but the principalities and the powers are.

Not so with you. Not so with us. God has entrusted political power with us. This is the good news! So all the invisible, gentle gestures that we might otherwise attribute to the ordinary, we may see from now on as having immense, immeasurable power.

Late in his life, Karl Barth was speaking with a colleague who was troubled about the events of his day. His friend was close to death, so Barth spoke words of comfort and encouragement to him. What did he tell him to encourage his friend?

He said, simply, “God really does rule – it’s true.”

Amen.

