

Purple Zone Sermon #1
A House Divided
Feb. 9, 2020
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If you were here in January, you may remember I preached a sermon on wholeness in which I talked about the importance of punctuation. For example, there's a big difference between, "I like to cook, my kids, and my pets" and "I like to cook my kids and my pets." I said that the slash is used to divide things, while the hyphen is used to connect things, and that God calls us to be hyphens in a slash-filled world. One of the reasons I preached that sermon was because I knew that our country is going to be challenged more than ever this year and that the church has a unique role to play in being the connective tissue that holds us together. If the church isn't being intentional about drawing hyphens, who else is going to do it? It might be smarter for me to shy away from such topics, but when it comes to sermon topics, I've never been accused of being smart.

I recognize that going down this road in a sermon is a bit like walking barefoot into a room full of thumbtacks, and yet, we have to talk about these things. If we bury our heads in the sand and only talk about God's love and grace and peace in the abstract, we're missing an opportunity to be a powerful witness to a world sorely lacking in love and grace and peace. This is the church's time to be the church, to be the body of Christ in our broken world.

But how can we model unity if we're not unified? How can we show people what it's like to disagree respectfully if we aren't doing that? As Christians, we have a powerfully important message to share with our country about being unified in the midst of our diversity through the love God has for each of us and all of us. We know that there is more that hyphens us together than slashes us apart, but that knowledge will be tested in a year when we will be tempted to take sides and see people on the other side as the enemy. We need to find a better way.

You may remember that last November I preached two sermons on food insecurity in Lexington. Those sermons were part of a project called "Preaching in the Purple Zone," led by Dr. Leah Schade from Lexington Theological Seminary. Crestwood was invited to be part of this project, which helps pastors and congregations learn to talk about controversial topics in ways that promote unity, empathy, and understanding that go beyond Facebook memes and sound bites.

I preached a sermon setting up the issue of food insecurity, and the next week Warren Rogers and I hosted a deliberative dialogue session during which people were invited to explore the topic more thoroughly. We had 24 people participate in what turned out to be a lively and productive conversation. I then preached a second sermon on the topic, incorporating what was talked about during the dialogue and extending a call to action for Crestwood to address the issue of food insecurity in Lexington. Fifteen people came to a meeting on Jan. 23, including three of our youth, and out of that meeting we're starting to talk about tangible ways we can make a difference on this issue in Lexington.

That process was so successful Warren and I have decided to do another round of the Purple Zone process, this time with a bit more controversial issue. I suggested the topic of when you should start putting out Christmas merchandise in retail stores, but Warren thought it was way too controversial. Warren suggested the topic of whether or not turn signals should be mandatory or optional, but we almost came to blows over that one. So, we decided to go with the

issue of our political system. Way less controversial than the other two. And if it doesn't go well, can I just say it was an honor serving as your pastor.

The official title of this topic is "A House Divided: What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?" We figured that's about as timely as you can get right now. Before I introduce the topic a bit further, let me remind you of the goals of this process because the success of this endeavor is predicated on the fact that we all understand what we are trying to accomplish together.

One thing we're not trying to do is change each other's minds. This is not a debate and there are no right and wrong sides. What we'll do in the dialogue, which will be next Sunday at 4 p.m., will be to present three different options on how to heal our political system, and then talk through both the pros and cons of those options. Our hope is that we will be able to establish some common ground and see where our beliefs overlap. That gives us a foundation from which to start building healthier relationships and more productive conversations.

What we hope to do is find ways to talk about the challenges of our political system so that we are talking with each other, not at each other. It's one thing to listen to someone so that you can craft an appropriate response; it's quite another to listen to someone in order to truly understand them. Engaging in this project is as much about how we talk to each other as what we are talking about, so I hope that you will join us for the dialogue next week at 4 p.m. to lend your voice to the conversation.

Although it may seem like we're talking about politics, there's a strong spiritual dimension to it, and the Bible gives us precedent for this kind of discussion. Jesus never shied away from confronting the political realities of his day, challenging the reign of Caesar and the rule of Pontus Pilate when they conflicted with the kingdom of God. In our passage today, the Pharisees try to trap Jesus with a political question about taxes, but Jesus neatly side-steps the trap, reminding them to give to Caesar what is Caesar's (that's the taxes), but give to God what is God's (that's everything, including a portion of their money). Jesus doesn't shy away from talking politics, but he also doesn't take sides or get divisive.

So we may think we shouldn't talk about politics in church, but that assumes that politics are outside of God's realm. As author Phillip Gulley wrote, "The question is not whether we should mix Christianity and politics. To follow Jesus is to be political." Every contentious issue and disputed policy are a part of God's realm, and our faith should inform every corner of our lives, including our politics, so we can't get away with ignoring it.

So, yes, Jesus dealt with politics, but not with the same challenges we face. Jesus didn't have to respond to irate social media posts, or contend with the insidiousness of a 24-hour news cycle. The political system in our world today has been indelibly marked by the conduits of communication at our disposal and the avenues with which we can express our own opinions. We're no longer resigned to over-the-fence pontificating or sternly written op-eds. Now, anyone with an opinion can voice it social media, and most of them do, sometimes without forethought or filter. And we call that politics.

But that's not politics. The root word "polis" simply means "pertaining to a city." Politics is the way in which humans organize themselves into a cohesive social unit. One writer said, "There is a process by which a group of people decides how to organize themselves, how to distribute power and resources, how to make decisions, how to live together harmoniously. That process is called 'politics'."

Wait! How to live together harmoniously? In the past week, we've had impeachment hearings, botched caucuses, ignored handshakes and ripped-up speeches. Is that living together

harmoniously? “Politics” and “harmony” have become polar opposites in our modern culture. It seems as if the topic of politics has become a wedge, dividing people into different ideological camps. Politics turns neighbors into red-faced enemies. It divides towns and families and churches. It makes otherwise decent people say terrible things about others who have different opinions. It makes people demonize the candidate of the opposing party. It makes people unfriend each other on Facebook. And, I believe, politics presents a real challenge for us as we try to be Christians first in this world. After all, how do we live out the commandment to love your neighbor when they have that other candidate’s sign in their yard?

I dare say that I don’t think any of us want our political system to be this way. We long for a more peaceful time in our political process, conveniently forgetting that such a time really never existed. Political parties have always been at each other’s throats. It’s simply compounded now by the media, the heatedness of the issues, and the widening divide among parties. But even though we want things to be different, sometimes it’s easier just to sit back and complain about the way things are rather than to make an effort to do something about it. Or, as psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham write, “It’s more entertaining to watch people throw rocks at each other over the wall than it is to participate in the slow, difficult process of dismantling the wall and understanding each other’s point of view.”

During this election year, you could argue that the very fabric of our nation is dependent upon our willingness to dismantle the wall between us. While we’ll never end up agreeing on everything – or on most things – we can still hold together as a nation if we are able to see each other, not as enemies or as others, but as people of passion who yearn for their country to be what they can believe it can be, and who yearn even more earnestly for God to be present in that process.

So, next week, we’re going to sit around a couple tables, red and blue and whatever other color you want to bring, and we’re going to talk about how we, as the united body of Christ, can infiltrate this house divided and spread a virus of radical love and acceptance and understanding. The church has a role to play this year and it may be the most important thing we can do for our country. Rather than endorsing a candidate or a platform, let’s endorse the good news of Jesus Christ, which has the power to bring us all together across the aisle to meet at a table, where our divisions are healed and our brokenness is made whole. We are not Republicans or Democrats or Independents or Others. We are children of God. Let’s start there.