

A House Divided Pt. 2
Romans 12
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Today, we're going to talk some more about politics. Ushers, please lock the doors and don't let anyone leave until the sermon is over. That includes the preacher. Why in the world would I step into the minefield of politics? Wouldn't it be easier just to stand up here and remind you that God is good and if we just have faith we'll go to heaven and Jesus loves you this I know? Yes, that would definitely be easier. And safer. And ensure my church key will work tomorrow. But I don't believe Jesus called me to the ministry to be safe, and I don't think you have faith just so you can coast into the afterlife. If we want to put this faith thing into action, we have to be willing to wade into the deep end of the pool.

But is there a more treacherous topic these days than politics? I thought I would lighten the mood with a few funny quotes about politics, because God knows there is plenty of material to work with. Let's start with Mark Twain, who said, "Politicians and diapers must be changed often, and for the same reasons." Henry Kissinger said, "Ninety percent of the politicians give the other 10% a bad reputation." And the inestimable Bill Murray is quoted as saying, "If I lie to the government, it's a felony. If they lie to us, it's politics."

That's not what politics is supposed to be, but that's what it has become. Steve Chapman of the Chicago Tribune said, "American politics is a bicycle with a rusty chain, flat tires, and no brakes. It's broken, and it's not taking any of us where we want to go." And yet, if I ask five of you what you think needs to be done to fix it, I'll get seven opinions, 10 jabby finger-points, and at least one sternly worded email tomorrow morning. So how do we talk about fixing our broken political system without contributing to the very divisiveness that defines our broken political system?

That's what we're talking about in this process, and I want to let our scriptures today provide the guardrails for how we go about doing this. As you know guardrails are helpful because they let you know the boundaries that separate the road from the weeds. Our goal is to stay on the road toward a productive conversation and out of the weeds that so easily derail us from civil discourse. As tempting as it may be to saddle up our high horse and strap on our righteous indignation, let's focus on staying on the road.

In the first scripture, Peter encourages his readers to seek peace and pursue it. I like that because it states implicitly that peace is not something easily attained. It's something we must seek and pursue, over and against the other things we are tempted to seek and pursue, like proving we're right and the other person is wrong. Someone once said, "You can be right or you can have friends." I would say, "You can be right or you can have peace." So, in our conversations, let's seek peace and pursue it.

The quote I read from Paul is even more poignant for our discussion. First, he encourages us to love one another with mutual affection and to outdo one another in showing honor. We try to outdo other people in so many other ways – with our knowledge, our opinions, our claim to know what God thinks. What if we sought to outdo the other person in showing honor, in being humble, in being willing to admit we might be wrong? How would our conversations about political issues be different if our goal was not to see who can shout the loudest but to try and outdo the other person in showing honor?

Paul closes his words with this beautiful phrase: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Do you hear the disclaimers there? “If it is possible.” So far as it depends on you.” Paul knows that living in peace with all isn’t always possible. Some people thrive on conflict and aren’t happy unless they are making others unhappy. Peace isn’t always possible. Sometimes the most peaceful thing to do is walk away from a conversation. But, as long as you have something to contribute to the conversation, make sure it is peaceful. Yes, that’s possible, even when talking about politics. So, let’s wade into the deep end.

Two weeks ago, I preached a sermon setting up this process of dialogue about our political system. I grounded this conversation in scripture and Jesus’ willingness to deal with the corrupt politics of his day. I then said that, as Christians, it’s our job to model for our culture what it’s like to disagree about controversial topics while still maintaining a foundation of respect for the other person. Finally, I invited us to practice what I preached by joining in a dialogue about our political system. That dialogue was last Sunday.

I had asked for RSVPs to the dialogue so Warren and I would know how many people to expect. The last time we did this on the topic of food insecurity, we had a bunch of RSVPs had 24 people who participated. For this dialogue on our political process, I had six RSVPs. One person RSVPed to say they were coming and five people RSVPed to say there’s no way in Hades they would be coming because they were afraid the dialogue would be too conflicted. So, Warren and I were prepared to lead a dialogue with one person, which I guess is more like a monologue.

Last Sunday, 28 people showed up. Twenty-eight. I don’t know everyone’s political affiliation, but it’s fair to say both sides of the political chasm were well-represented. We started by going around the room and asking each person why they showed up. What was important enough about this topic that they would give up two hours on a Sunday afternoon to talk about it?

The answers were indicative of the tumultuous times in which we live. Here are some of them: “I’m concerned about relationships breaking down over politics.” “We’ve moved away from the ability to talk civilly.” “We are moving into uncharted waters in our country.” “My mom was a Republican and my dad was a Democrat and that was never a problem.” “I’m concerned about the world my grandkids will grow up in.” “I don’t want Crestwood to be divided.” “I want to know how to disagree with someone without putting them down.”

Two particular answers really caught my attention. One person said, “I want to learn how to have a less divisive ear,” which I think highlights the importance of listening in this process of creating civil discourse. In the Bible, the letter of James says, “Let us be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” But too often, we are reluctant to listen, quick to speak and way too quick to get angry. How can we listen with less divisive ears? The other response was one I appreciated for its honesty: “I’m not convinced that civil discourse is even possible but I’m here to support Kory and Warren.” You know what? I’m not convinced, either. But if it’s going to happen, it’s got to start in the church.

We divided into two groups and talked through three options of how we might begin healing the political divide in our country: Reduce dangerous, toxic talk; make fairer rules for politics and follow them; and take control and make decisions closer to home. In the group I led, we had a lively conversation about each of these options, weighing the pros and cons and consequences. There was often disagreement, sometimes stated with passion, and yet no one was ever disagreeable. We asked questions like, “What words need to be eliminated from our vocabularies in order to seek peace?” and “How can we seek to learn the truth rather than only

expose ourselves to one stream of thinking?” People spoke with vulnerability and honesty. It was a beautiful thing to watch unfold.

When the groups finished their dialogues, we came back together to talk about what we learned, not necessarily about the topic, but the process. What about this process made people willing to open up about their fears and concerns about our political process? This is where the church should be listening, because this is how we set the stage for these kinds of tough talks. Several people said they felt like our conversation was not threatening and was a safe space to talk about such a highly charged topic. There are very few places we feel safe today to express our opinions without being ridiculed or attacked. As the church, we have to create space for people to say things with which we disagree without making them feel invalidated. They hold as strongly to their opinion as we do to ours, even if we believe they are wrong.

Another thing the dialogues did was force people to look at both sides of an issue. Too often, we only look at the viewpoints that support our beliefs, creating an echo chamber that reinforces our ways of thinking and devalues opposing views. One participant said, and this was probably my favorite line of the whole evening, “I saw my own biases.” Part of seeking and pursuing peace means recognizing and claiming the ways we’ve contributed to the lack of peace. When we see our own biases, we acknowledge that we could be just as wrong as we think the other person is. The pursuit of peace starts with the awareness of our own humanity, our own pride, and our own biases.

The last question we asked last Sunday was this: “What does faith have to do with this?” Is it wrong to mix religion and politics? Maybe we should just stick to the God stuff and let the experts handle the politics. How’s that working for us so far? Here’s what we came up with. Our faith should lead us to introspection about our role in the conflict. Our faith should provide a moral compass that helps us continue to discern right from wrong. And finally, our faith should lead us to make a commitment not to be divisive. “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

I don’t think we solved any of the problems in our divided political system. I certainly didn’t walk out more hopeful that this year is going to be any easier. But I did leave with the hope that we are better equipped to talk about it. The 28 of us present realized that you can disagree without being disagreeable, that you can talk about politics without tearing the fabric of harmony and unity that exists. I know, we’re just one church in one city in America. But it has to start somewhere, doesn’t it? Why not with us? Peace will not come easily in our world. But I’m not ready to give up on it. Are you? As we move through this year, let us seek peace and pursue it, not only in our hearts, but in our world.