

Grace and peace to you.

In an election season, Jesus' words often feel more dangerous, probably because he so frequently called out the abuses of power by the authorities of his day. As a preacher in the 21st Century, United States of America, there are things I can say from the pulpit, and things that would jeopardize this church's non-profit status (as well as things that make congregation members uncomfortable). Legally (and morally), religious leaders and organizations cannot endorse political candidates, but we can talk about values and encourage people to vote their conscience. If you hear any religious leader tell people who to vote for, they are either abusing their position, OR, in this day and age, it is possible that they are being impersonated by people who seek to create division and strife by distributing fake videos, photos, and messages online.

I take my position as your pastor seriously, so I will not publicly endorse or celebrate any political candidate – before or after the November 5 election (or any other election). Which means, if you see an email or text or Facebook post purporting to be or show me telling you who to vote for, or celebrating that a particular candidate won the election (especially if the results are contested, or still being tallied), whatever your immediate emotional response might be, please know: that cannot really be me, because I won't do that. But those who thrive off of sowing division and distrust could easily fabricate such things these days, so be wary of anything you see, especially online, from anyone.

However, just because I will not allow myself to be partisan, does not mean my preaching will never be political. Every time Jesus wades into questions of how we treat one another, we are talking about politics! And today of all days, Jesus casts aside our notions of being great or seeking glory. To his disciples' likely disappointment, Jesus did not seek political or military power or control. Instead, he changed peoples' lives through personal relationships, and then sent them to transform others' lives: calling all of us to feed, shelter, befriend, care for, and in our day-and-age, yes, advocate for, all of God's beloved children.

I have no idea who said this first, but it's an important reminder: You will never look into the eyes of someone God does not love. Every time you see someone, every time I turn away from someone (in fear, distrust, or anger), that someone is a beloved child of God. And sometimes I think to myself, "Thank goodness God loves that person, because I find it really hard!" But it's a helpful reminder to me that I don't have all the answers, that my preferred political party doesn't have all the answers.

An ELCA pastor who I respect, shared a Facebook post from someone else: "The Christian Voting Guide" by Pastor Brian Zahnd. I didn't agree with all his points, some need additional nuance and conversation, but it's part of a blogpost he wrote, so of course it isn't fully fleshed out! But standing alongside James and John this morning, tempted to ask Jesus for special favors, I commend to you Pastor Brian's top four points: "1. The political process, while necessary, has little to do with how God is saving the world. 2. The fate of the kingdom of God

does not depend upon political contests. 3. Don't be naïve, political parties are more interested in Christian votes than they are in Christian values. 4. The bottom line for political parties is power. The bottom line for a Christian is love. And therein lies the rub.”¹

During the children's message, I shared Jesus' upside-down message: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” And Jesus calls us to do likewise. That's why members of this congregation make quilts and care kits; the same type of personal hygiene kits and quilts that have been given to survivors of Hurricane Helene. That's why members of this congregation contribute and volunteer with Christ's Kitchen meals and Loads of Love laundry ministry. That's why members of this congregation help lead worship, serve on council, mow the lawn, fix the gutters, and paint the shed. That might even be why some of us stopped by the Fireside Room after worship to get a flu or COVID shot, to help protect our neighbors from illness.

Jesus tells all his disciples, and us too: “You know that among the Nations those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42b-44). And in our passage from the letter of Hebrew, we are offered a glimpse of what a non-tyrannical leader looks like: “Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ...And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also, Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed” (Hebrews 5:1-2, 4-5a). The glory claimed by Jesus Christ, is the glory of the cross – not the blood and gore of a Mel Gibson film, but the outpouring of love that not even hate or death can stop. No matter what we humans do to Jesus, God still loves us and willingly suffers death, even on a cross, to conquer death itself. No matter who is elected to Congress or the Oval Office, people's lives will certainly be affected, but no matter what, God still loves us and is at work to bring God's kingdom into our earthly reality. No matter who your neighbor votes for, God still loves them.

It took me a while to figure this out, but it was an important lesson. God's kingdom needs all of us – even the haters and fear mongers and smear campaigners. It might not be my piece of the work to convert those spewing hate, but it certainly isn't my task to fuel their hatred, or my own disdain! Those of us caught in the tangles of fear and anger and even hatred, need God's redemptive love more than ever before. But, just like the high priests, every part of the work of God's kingdom is to be done by those whom God has called and equipped. Maybe that's you. Maybe that's someone you have nurtured and formed with your loving presence and model of service. I don't know, but I am sure that Jesus, who gave his life to free us from death, sin, and evil continues to call us (and equip us) to follow his example of loving service for all the beloved children of God (yup, everyone). Amen.

¹ <https://brianzahnd.com/2024/10/election-season-and-your-soul-2/>