

**The Power of Words:
Faith and Politics**

I Corinthians 1:10-12, 12:31, 13:4-8

Is there a better way to do democracy?

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There is nothing in our American culture today as polarizing as politics. If you don't believe me, try to make a political comment on social media, and see how it causes a digital feeding frenzy. I have been burned a couple of times by that. I don't make any kind of comment that is directly political, but some of my posts in the past have had political implications. I've learned that such comments always generate more heat than light. I've seen friends on Facebook, people I love and admire, get into it with other friends, whom I love and admire, and finally I just have to take the whole post down. Even the pandemic, which of all things should generate united community effort, has become politicized to the point where wearing a mask (or not) or even believing that the pandemic is a real thing (or not) associates a person with a political point of view.

As background for this sermon series, we have used a sermon series preached by Adam Hamilton at Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City in 2014. As I said last week, we planned the series before the pandemic hit, but we did know there was an election cycle coming up, and we figured this would be a word we needed to hear in this season. I think anybody keeping up would agree that in the last 6 years, the quality of our political discourse has deteriorated even further. We need to figure out a way to do democracy better. We need a more excellent way.

So we are doing this series on "The Power of Words." Roy Beth started us off by talking about words that build up and tear down. Last week I talked about words we use in our families. And today I am going where angels fear to tread. We're going to talk about how we use our words politically, because we don't do this very well.

The New Testament shows a fair amount of interaction between Jesus and the early church and the governing authorities. Jesus was asked questions about paying the burdensome taxes of the Romans, and he gave this principle: "*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.*"¹ We're going to address that text in three weeks.

Paul gave advice to the Roman church and to his friend Titus, reminding them to be subject to the governing authorities, primarily because the

followers of Jesus had come not to incite a political revolution, but to empower a spiritual revolution.

Then there's our key verse for the series: "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*"² How can we apply that to our political discourse nowadays?

All this is not to say we shouldn't get involved with politics; the Church has always been involved with politics. My first year of ministry was 1980—the year of a presidential election. So that fall I preached a sermon, with all the passion of a seminary student, about getting involved in politics and constructively engaging the electoral process. After church, one of my members walked out and say, "Preacher, I agree with you 100%. Christians should just stay out of politics!"

I'm not saying today that we should totally stay away from politics. We should discuss our political differences, argue our points, and engage in healthy debate. That's how democracy functions. One person has an idea; another person has a different idea, so they discuss their ideas, and they come out with a third idea that is hopefully better than either of the original ideas. That's how politics is supposed to work.

But it's not working like that any more, is it? The political language we are exposed to today is full of hostility, meanness, half-truths, unproven conjectures, conspiracy theories—no matter which side you stand on. They never heard my mama tell my brother and me, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." Why are we finding healthy political conversation so difficult? Two reasons come to mind.

We don't listen to one another. We are so intent on making our point that we don't take time to try to understand the other person. Compromise is not an option, so we end up talking *at* people instead of talking *with* people, or talking past them and never changing a mind or making an impact. The Letter of James has a verse that we could use in all our conversations, political or otherwise. It's James 1:19: "*Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.*" Usually we get that backwards, don't we? Everyone is quick to speak, quick to anger, and slow to listen. Helpful speech doesn't work that way.

The second reason our political discourse is failing is because we don't recognize our opponents as people. We demonize those we disagree with. They are horrible people—Nazis, fascists, Communists, socialists, satan-worshippers—their motives are suspect, and their methods are devious. How can we talk to them? The name-calling that goes on in politics today is not intended to help anyone see the light; it is intended to poke your opponent in the eye. You can't see the light when you're being poked in the eye.

But Jesus said the basic law of God is love, and it includes, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*"³ We have to believe that even a person who has a radically different perspective from our own is a child of God, a person of sacred worth, and deserving of respect.

The world and certainly our nation were saddened by the death last week of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the outspoken and beloved justice of the Supreme Court. Justice Ginsburg was the anchor of the liberal end of the Court. Appointed by Bill Clinton, she was a champion for women's rights, which she preferred to call gender equality, and the right of a woman to have an abortion. Ruth Bader Ginsburg's best friend on the court was Antonin Scalia, a hard-core conservative appointed by Ronald Reagan, a champion for gun rights, the death penalty, and against abortion. Yet as far apart as they were on many issues, they traveled together, attended the opera together, and celebrated New Year's together every year.

This week one of Scalia's sons shared a story about a judge who was in Scalia's chambers one day and noticed a bouquet of two dozen roses. Scalia said he had bought them to give to Ruth for her birthday. The judge said, "So what good have these roses done for you? Name one five-four case of any significance where you got Justice Ginsburg's vote." Antonin Scalia replied, "Some things are more important than votes."⁴ That's good politics.

The hateful, bitter, angry language we hear in the political arena today is simply not acceptable. Jesus took time in the Sermon on the Mount to say, "*You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to*

judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.'"⁵ Of course, murder is wrong, but Jesus is saying that murderous words that kill the souls of others are equally destructive. Let no evil talk come out of your mouth. Build others up with your words. Give grace to those who hear.

So is there a better way to do democracy? How might we improve our political speech? In 2014, Adam Hamilton asked that question to Senator John Danforth. Senator Danforth was a Republican senator from Missouri for 18 years and for a year was our Ambassador to the United Nations. He is also an Episcopal priest and presided over the funeral of President Ronald Reagan. Danforth has written a couple of books on faith and politics. He made three statements to put our political conversations in perspective.⁶

First, politics is not absolute. It's just politics. It's always going to be messy and controversial and conflicted. That's OK. It's not like politics is the ultimate thing. Politics is not God. And it's not God's people versus the enemies of God. Faith puts politics in its proper perspective. It's just politics.

Second is the concept of virtue. Good politics puts the public interest before personal or private interest. Politics today has become exclusively about pandering to people's self-interest: "What do I get out of it? How can I get the most benefit and pay the lowest taxes?" But faith is based on the love commandment, and love in the New Testament is *agape*, or self-sacrificing love. The greatest example of love is the cross, where Jesus denied his self-interest and gave his life for us. Faith can offer that perspective to politics—public over personal interest.

The third idea is the ministry of reconciliation. Politics is about social interaction between different groups of people. Religion done right is all about breaking down barriers, bringing people together, not driving wedges that tear people apart. It's hard to bring people together if you don't know people who are different than you. You have to know people on the other side and like them in their humanity. Then you can come together.

This kind of Christian community is very difficult to achieve, especially in our current political atmosphere. But this is the model of what Dr. King called beloved community. Paul talks over and over about the grace of

Christ that transcends our political barriers. In Ephesians, Jesus is the One who has made peace between the Jews and the Gentiles, “*has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*”⁷ In Galatians, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*”⁸ In Colossians, “*In that renewal [of the Spirit] there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!*”⁹ In the true Christian community, there is no Democrat or Republican, there is no liberal or conservative, there is no blue vs. red, but all are one in the love of Christ, which calls us to love one another.

This is still a more excellent way. Paul had a productive ministry for over a year in Corinth, and later on, probably in Ephesus, he received some messages from Corinth that things were not going so well. The church was experiencing conflict. They were quarreling among themselves and choosing sides and just not getting along. Paul’s immediate response was, “*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.*”¹⁰ Then Paul spends time with each controversy in the church and gives the best advice he can, finally ending up telling the church that they are all like one body, and they need to function like one.

Then Paul tells them he will show them a more excellent way, and he writes or dictates the magnificent chapter on love. This was not written just to be read at weddings; it was written to spread a blanket of peace over a church that was fighting among themselves. This is how you do it. Read this with me, and wherever it says “love,” think your name in that place. Think about how closely you fit the pattern. This is the rule of behavior for followers of Jesus:

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*¹¹

How did that go? Did you see yourself in that passage?

Emma Daniel Gray lived near the seat of political power for 24 years. From 1955 to 1979, she was a housekeeper at the White House, and it was her job every night to clean the Oval Office. She served under six Presidents. Every night, after she cleaned the office, she would place her hands on the back of the President's chair, and she would say a prayer for the most powerful man in the world. It was a prayer for blessings, for wisdom, and for the safety of the President. Emma retired in 1979, under her favorite President, Jimmy Carter. She said she liked him because he was also a person of prayer.

Emma died in 2009, and her pastor had these words to say about her: "She saw life through the eyes of promise is the way I'd put it. You can always look around and find reasons to be [unhappy] . . . but you couldn't be around her and not know what she believed. She always believed there was a higher power to grab on to that would lift you above any circumstance, and she was always able to do that. . . . She preached her own eulogy by the life that she lived."¹²

I don't have all the answers to our political problems today. You don't have all the answers to all our political problems today. Nobody does, no matter what claims they make. But I do believe that the key to healing the political divide in our country is a matter of faith. It depends on what we believe—about God, about ourselves, about our country. The blueprint for healing our divisions is contained in the Word of God, where Jesus says, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*"¹³ Where James says, "*Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.*"¹⁴ Where Paul says, "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*"¹⁵

There may be a few hundred people who will hear this message today. By the end of the week or in ten days, maybe a thousand people will give it a listen. What if every one of us who hears this message would commit to following the way of Jesus in their political conversations—to engage in serious discussions, not always to agree with everything, but always to love one another, to respect other viewpoints, to put others above self, and to break down barriers to relationships with those who believe differently? What if we all did that? What if we started a thousand tiny little revolutions

in the way we do our political business? I believe it would bring us some peace. I believe it would make a difference. I believe it could even change the world.

¹Matthew 22:21.

² Ephesians 4:29.

³ Matthew 22:39.

⁴ Jennifer Senior, "The Ginsburg-Scalia Act Was Not a Farce," New York Times, Sept. 22, 2020.

⁵ Matthew 5:21-22.

⁶ Interview with John Danforth, "The Power of Words: Religion and Politics," sermon by Adam Hamilton, August 31, 2014.

⁷ Ephesians 2:14.

⁸ Galatians 3:28.

⁹ Colossians 3:11.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 1:10.

¹¹ I Corinthians 13:4-7.

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/20/AR2009062001661.html>.

¹³ Matthew 22:39.

¹⁴ James 1:19.

¹⁵ Ephesians 4:29.