

Last Sunday we welcomed several new members into St. Paul’s. Because it can be dry, I typically don’t review what our official *Book of Discipline* says about the meaning of church membership. (The BOD is our book of order and rules: it’s a policy and procedure manual for organizing our life as a United Methodist congregation.)

Even so, a couple of items about membership seemed particularly relevant for our ***Power of Words*** theme. For example, ¶219 of our BOD reads: “Faithful discipleship includes the obligation to participate in the corporate life of the congregation with fellow members of the body of Christ. A member is bound in sacred covenant to speak the truth *in love*, always ready to confront conflict in the *spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation*.”

This last sentence provides a ‘test’ for the way we use words in the context of our religious practice: 1.) it’s not enough that we speak truth; it must be truth *spoken in love*, and 2.) we’re encouraged to confront (rather than to avoid) conflict. But we need to wait for a time when our spirits are bending towards forgiveness and reconciliation, not argument and discord.

Now, we’ve looked at enough scripture in the last two weeks to know this is consistent with Biblical wisdom. The question is, does this faith perspective -- speaking the truth in love and approaching conflict with a spirit of reconciliation -- does this also apply to our politics? Or, do Christians have an exemption when it comes to talking about political leaders or political issues; where what we say doesn’t matter because – you know – “it’s politics”?

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Here one other of our UM statements about membership, from ¶220 of the *BOD*: “Each member is called upon to be a witness for Christ in the world, a light and leaven in society, and a ***reconciler in a culture of conflict***... to radiate and exemplify the Christ of hope.” [Let me repeat...] That is a powerful sentiment, clarifying that, at the very least, our denomination affirms that the ways we speak and interact in the political realm must radiate and reflect our faith.

So, as we revisit our memory verse for this series, Eph. 4:29, let’s recite it, but as we do, think about how well you apply this verse in the arena of politics; including what you post of Facebook, which emails you forward, which pundits you listen

to, and particularly how you talk about those on the ‘other’ side: “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.”

Grading on a scale from A to F, what grade do you give yourself when applying this counsel to your own engagement with politics?

Here’s the deal, if we’re to be ***reconcilers in a culture of conflict***, we have our work cut out for us! As we engage in political discussions, we need to be accountable when our words do not conform to Eph. 4:29 (and all of the other scriptures we been exploring in this series). Otherwise, our nation (and our churches) will continue to be ripped apart every election cycle.

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I want to offer 3 things as we consider the power of words in realm of politics:

First, and most importantly, we need to seek ‘the mind of Christ’ as we form our political views. In our reading this morning the apostle Paul, who was on a missionary journey in the city of Ephesus, has heard about conflict in the church of Corinth. So, he writes this letter to Corinth to urge the Christians there to seek unity. We see that in verse 10: “be united in the ***same mind*** and the same purpose.”

Paul then clarifies, in 2:16, that the same mind to be united in, is nothing other than the mind of Christ. Paul writes, “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” and then he points to himself and his companions: “We have ***the mind*** of Christ.” Paul is asserting that a key task of faith is that the mind of Christ inform our thinking. Paul makes this even more explicit in Philippians 2:5; “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ...”

I often imagine what might happen if Jesus walked in and sat down on our sofas as we watched FOX News or MSNBC. Think about that: which ‘news source’ you use most and then picture Jesus on the sofa next to you. Do you think Jesus would turn, slap you a high five and say, “I really love it when Hannity lays into those lib-tards!” or do you think Jesus might offer you fist bump and say, “Maddow is awesome when she shreds those conservative pinheads!” Do you think Jesus would do that? Or do you think Jesus would turn and say, “I’m confused, I thought you were my follower. How does watching this help you grow in practicing the

love of God -- and loving others -- with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength?”

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Secondly, we need to break the habit of confusing **finite things** with infinite things. What I mean is that the politics and kingdoms of this world are finite and fleeting. But we seem to operate as if our political issues and systems are infinite and God-like. From a faith perspective – a Christian faith perspective – there’s only one thing that’s infinite: God and God’s love expressed in Christ! That’s what the NT affirms!

The essentials of our faith are outlined in the historic creeds of the church! You can read them in our hymnal and see that these creeds say not a word about beliefs in a particular form of economy, government, or about how to structure the social order of society. And yet the hyperbole suggests that you can’t vote for a Democrat and also be a Christian, or that you can’t be a Republican and really believe in the compassion of Jesus.

In the book *Hijacked: Responding to the Partisan Church Divide*, the authors observe: “Christians on both the conservative and liberal ends of the spectrum (with an ever-shrinking moderate middle) can fall victim to the tendency to conflate their theology and political ideology.” When this happens, those on both the right and the left judge those on the other side not simply as disagreeing, but as god-less heretics.

Friends, we’ve got to ratchet this down! Again, from the book *Hijacked*: “[Followers of Jesus] must not only ‘tolerate’ one another and our differing opinions... we must love one another in spite of our divergent opinions – a love that **bridges** the ideological differences and allows us to join hands with one another and with God in the great work of reconciling the world to himself.”

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These leads me to a third point. Some people see our denomination as mushy or wishy-washy when it comes to social issues, as if being ‘moderate’ on various issues -- instead of driving a stake in the ground against the ‘other’ side -- is somehow spineless and weak.

This ‘mushy middle’ critique always had some traction with me, until I began to think a little differently. Let me ask: is it **really less** courageous to stand in the moderate middle, between two

opposing factions, knowing that you are as likely as not to get pummeled by both sides?

It is my deep engagement with scripture, and particularly the teachings of Jesus, that convince me that our highest calling isn’t to take a stand against a brother or sister in Christ, but rather to follow to follow in the way Jesus, practicing a life of love and grace that transcends the political/cultural/economic agendas of the world. (That is, by the way, truly what it means to be Not of This World!)

As your pastor, I’ll be honored if you disparage me as a ‘flaming moderate.’ And this has nothing to do with being lukewarm, but everything to do with being a passionate follower of Jesus who will counsel those on the left and right to seek God’s will above all else – especially beyond and above the din of our corrosive, uncivil, political discourse.

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I will conclude with a story about Emma Daniel Gray. Do you know that name? It’s unlikely that anyone spent more time in the White House than Emma Daniel Gray. From 1955 until retiring in 1979 she was the woman who cleaned the oval office for 6 different presidents: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter.

Each night for 24 years, Emma Gray [the granddaughter of a slave] would clean the oval office. When she came to the president’s chair, she would pause, cleaning materials in hand, and say a prayer for her president. It didn’t matter if they were Republican or Democrat, if she agreed with their social values or religious leanings. She just prayed for the most powerful leader of the world. She knew that the person occupying that chair – her president - needed the help of a higher power.

Emma Gray died in 2009. Her pastor said this, “you couldn’t be around her and not know what she believed. She always believed there was a higher power to grab onto that would lift you above any circumstance.”

Emma Gray should be a role model for us. For she had the mind of Christ. She didn’t confuse finite politics with an Infinite God, and she was a prayerful bridge – standing in the middle – between the God she loved and the leaders she served.

We should strive for no less. Amen.