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First Presbyterian Church

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Luke 6:27-38

4th in the “Who Is My Neighbor?” series

Loving God, as we prepare to hear your Word, we ask that you open our hearts and minds to your truth. Guide us to understand how our faith calls us to act justly and love boldly in all aspects of life, including how we engage in our communities and politics. May your Spirit move through the message today, shaping us into people who seek the common good and reflect your love to all our neighbors. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

“You’ve Got To Be Kidding Me”

This is my 4th sermon in our series “Who Is My Neighbor?” Just a quick recap: it was last winter when I started thinking about what I wanted the church’s voice and presence to be in the middle of what I assumed, and has turned out to be, a heated presidential election. I knew I didn’t want our voice – the church’s voice -- to be heated, or divisive, or seen as partisan. But I also knew– and I believe this deeply – that the church should have a voice. Because friends, if we don’t contribute our voice; if the church does not contribute its voice to the conversation . . . to the political conversation . . . we are ceding our voice to others, and I don’t think that’s faithful.

So I want to talk with you for a bit about that, because this is important. And honestly, it’s why I’m doing this whole sermon series. Something has gone terribly wrong in our country and with the tone of our politics, and as religious people we have a duty, and a calling, and an obligation to the one we call Lord and Savior to make it better.

It is critical for us to think about how our faith informs our politics, because our faith informs – should inform -- every part of our lives. *Every part.* Presbyterians have always affirmed that God is sovereign over all of life, which means we cannot simultaneously put ourselves at the center and shove God aside and push neighbor away, no matter how different they are or how much we fear them or how thoroughly we reject their politics.

And here I want to address something I hear a lot, which is don't talk about politics in church! And why I do . . .

First, a correction to the idea that this can't be done: the separation of church and state is not the same thing as the intersection of faith and politics. The separation of church and state means the government cannot mandate (for lack of a better word) a state-sponsored religion; and, we are free to practice any religion or no religion. This is the 1st Amendment. The church cannot endorse candidates, either, or it's at jeopardy of losing its tax-exempt status. And friends, I would never be inclined to nor is it my role to tell you who to vote for or how to vote.

But we must be able to talk about faith and politics. These two things are important dimensions of our lives, and politics doesn't stand apart from our deeply held values. And our religion has something to say about what we should value. Jesus had a lot to say about what we should, and should not, value. And I believe when we go into the voting booth, we are making a declaration about what we value. Like it or not, our political leaders (really, all leaders, if they're leaders), see the world a certain way; they see the world as it is. But they also see the world as it should be; they have a vision for how it should be. And their aim . . . again, if they're good leaders . . . their aim is to close the gap between what is, and what should be.

Jesus did this. He saw the world as it is, and he saw the world as it should be – the Kingdom of God he, he called it – and his ministry was all about closing that gap.

When we step into the voting booth, we are, in essence, asking ourselves, is this person's understanding of where the world is, and where it should be, consistent with my understanding of what Jesus said and what the scriptures teach us? Is it consistent with those two things? And the reason why we need to ask ourselves that is because we can't separate our Sunday selves from our Monday through Saturday selves. Remember, God is sovereign over all of life. We don't leave our faith at the doors of our offices, or clubs, or voting booth, for that matter. John Calvin is rumored to have said that What we believe about God may be personal, but how we live as God's children is anything but. We are called to engage the world, and to help make the world a better place. Why? Because God loves the world and cares about what happens to it, and we are Christ's hands and feet and heart in it.

And how we go about being those hands and feet and heart can make for hard conversations. But again, we must be willing to have these conversations, and we must be willing to have them here. I mean, if we can't talk about values here with our brothers and sisters in Christ where can we? And sometimes those values, and how they affect our politics, can be hard to talk about. Now, I understand why people don't want to politics on Sunday when we're surrounded by it every other day of the week – the cable news shows squawk at us, the papers carry bad headlines, our social media feeds are filled with political bantering and slandering. I get it, and I agree, that we don't want to hear about it every Sunday. I get that, and I try to discern when to put my foot on the gas in sermons and when to take it off. I also don't always get that right, and I hope you'll forgive me.

But we do need to talk sometimes about politics, the values that shape our politics, in order for us to think about and understand how and why our faith plays a role in them. Because here's the thing: if the church isn't talking about this stuff, where are we getting our information and making our decisions? Well, we're making decisions based on 30-second TV spots or our news outlet of choice, which is likely going to be fairly biased. And I just don't think that it would be faithful to my calling as a Teaching Elder, which is what historically pastors have been – teaching elders – to not get us think about how our faith – not our preferred political party -- informs our beliefs about weighty matters.

To drive home this point, in a sermon titled “Parables, Priorities, and Politics”, Senator Jack Danforth from the great show me state of Missouri, who is Republican and also an Episcopal priest, said “We believe in one God, and our one God is certainly not politics. Politics is important, but we cannot allow it to be our ultimate concern. Dostoevsky (daa·stoy·ev·skee)said, “Without God, all things are permitted.” That is where we are today in politics, Danforth said. Without God, anything goes in politics, however crude. With God, all things are not permitted, and we (the church) should say so.” Folks, Jesus had a lot of strong opinions on how we should live our lives and what we should value. Dare I say, Jesus, too, had a political platform. And you know what was in it? Hard stuff that you are not going to hear about or learn about from the news. You'll only get this message at church.

Today he says to the people who are still listening to his sermon on the plain, which is likely a slimmer crowd than he started with given the fact that he's told them a whole bunch of stuff they'd rather not hear . . . today he tells them and therefore us "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and turn the other cheek." If these exhortations don't present a challenge to our prevailing political climate, I don't know what does.

Let's start with "love your enemies" and "do good to those who hate you". Imagine if political opponents viewed each other not as enemies to be defeated, but as people deserving of respect? Hard to imagine, isn't it? Think about the civil discourse and cooperation this could foster, though. Instead of responding to hostility with more hostility, we would be able to engage in constructive dialogue; maybe even find compromises.

Next up is "turning the other cheek." Crazy, I know, but this one is especially relevant in an environment where revenge politics and tit-for-tat tactics dominate. Whether it's smear campaigns or personal attacks, the political landscape often seems fueled by vengeance and score-settling. Imagine if we followed Jesus who calls us to resist the urge to escalate conflict and instead seek to break the cycle of animosity.

Next on Jesus's platform is "giving to everyone who asks" and "if someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt." This platform invites a spirit of generosity, and not only in personal interactions but in the broader sense of communal responsibility. Where debates about wealth inequality, healthcare, and social safety nets are fierce, this passage can remind leaders and citizens alike of the need for policies that reflect care for all, especially the most vulnerable.

Next is Jesus's message of reconciliation. He points to a way of healing relationships through forgiveness, generosity, and nonviolent responses to hostility. If more political leaders and citizens adopted an attitude of forgiveness and grace, it might create space for bridging divides, rebuilding trust, and fostering unity in our fractured nation.

And all of this is wrapped up in the Golden Rule; verse 31. Say it with me: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. *Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.* There are two things Jesus tells us we better remember: love

God with everything and love our neighbor as ourselves, and Jesus added the Golden Rule to that. Our political platform as Christians is this: love God with everything and love our neighbor as ourselves, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. So let us see people as God sees them; to see people as people and not as positions; and to express kindness, compassion and empathy for other people. These are our marching orders. This is our mandate. That is the world as it should be.

And this is the future we're trying to build here at First Presbyterian Church and in our community, and it is worthy of your support. I hope you will join me in making a pledge to our "Five For Five" stewardship initiative. Friends, your pledge is not just a financial contribution—it's an investment in the mission of God's kingdom; it's an investment in the Golden Rule; and it's an investment in creating the community Jesus calls us to create. I cannot think of anything else that is more worthy of your time, talents, and treasure. As you prayerfully consider your pledge for the coming year, I encourage you to reflect on the words of Jesus in Luke 6:27-38 and to support the work we are doing to love each other, to serve our neighbors, and to make a difference in the world. For when we invest in our mission, we are investing in the future of a church that embodies God's love in every way.

I am very grateful that First Presbyterian Church is, and always has been, a worshipping community that is willing to engage difficult conversations. I know it's not easy; in a social media and media biased age, our brains are less and less conditioned to have uncomfortable conversations. So I very much appreciate that you're willing to engage in them, and I want you to know I don't take that for granted and you are to be commended. And I trust that throughout the process, we will always show mercy to our neighbor. Because at the end of it all, that's what this series is about. It's about recognizing that the person on the other side is also made in the image of God, and deserving of dignity, compassion and love.

And it's about how our faith teaches that we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul, and we must love our neighbor as ourselves.

So let us work toward a culture of kindness and generosity, a politics of humility and compassion (that closes the gap), and a social order that is fair and just.

As those who follow Jesus, this is our work, and it begins anew every day.

So may we, as a church, continue to be a light in the world, a neighbor to all, and a community that reflects the radical love of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Holy God, we thank you for the challenge and hope found in your Word. May our faith continue to inform how we live, serve, and engage with the world around us. Help us to be neighbors to all, standing for justice, mercy, and love in both our personal lives and in the public square. Empower us by your Spirit to be instruments of your peace and grace in every corner of the world. In Christ's name, Amen.