

“Seriously” • Matthew 22:34-40
Sheth LaRue • November 1, 2020
Aurora First Presbyterian Church

I’ve been struggling with what to say this morning as the election looms two days away. I’ve been wrestling with whether I should stick with the lectionary passages, preach about the saints who have gone before us, and maybe offer up a brief word or two about the election in a prayer. It would be safe. It would be comfortable. It would be easy. I think I’ve been called to this pulpit in part to bring you those messages, because after a long week in this world we need a good message that goes down easy. And if I’m honest with you, I really enjoy my job, I enjoy this community, and easy-to-swallow sermons don’t get pastors fired.

But I know that I’ve been called to this pulpit to bring you some not-so-easy to swallow messages, because there are times when we need those words as well. There are times when I will have to get up here and give you some medicine. It won’t go down well...it’ll probably have you upset for a few days...but it’s good medicine.

There are certain things I can and cannot do here in the pulpit – Lyndon Johnson as a senator in 1954 made sure that any tax-exempt organization cannot engage in political campaign activity. Sifting through all the tax jargon, it boils down to this: when I am in this pulpit on a Sunday morning in a leadership capacity I cannot tell you who to vote for, who to not vote for, or how to vote concerning certain referendums. If you’re at my house and you’re wearing a mask, I’d be glad to suggest candidates and referendums, but here in this space it’s against the law. I honor that, respect that, and am thankful for that.

But...but as I have watched the news, as I’ve scrolled through social media, and what I’ve witnessed with my own eyes in our city...there has to be *something* that I can say from this space about the elections’ culmination this Tuesday. No matter on what side your allegiance lies, you have to admit that things in our country – and things in our politics – are not well. There’s anger, distrust, sadness, fear, skepticism, over-involvement, and total apathy.

We have supporters from both political parties proudly displaying their candidate’s yard signs and flags. We have supporters from both political parties holding civil discussions and riotous rallies. We have supporters from both political parties desperately seeking the Christian vote, gathering behind them big names and big churches and big denominations. We have liars

and truth-tellers, pundits and soothsayers, Republicans and Democrats all seeking your vote. They want you to believe them...believe in their platform...believe in their vision for the future.

I've watched good Christian Republicans berate Democrats, and I've watched good Christian Democrats berate Republicans. Good Christians from both parties have posted on social media pictures of their party's opponent with the words "Pray for blah-blah" at the top of the photo, and the words "Psalm 109:8-9" on the bottom of the photo. Those verses say, "May his days be few; may another seize his position. May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow." Good Christians, not-so-tongue-in-cheek, are praying for the swift death of an individual, and praying also that that person's family will suffer as well. Good Christians have claimed Christ's Lordship over this nation and city while threatening violence and death on Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and atheists.

I think it's easy to say that we're not the ones doing it – *they* are. *Those* people over *there* are doing it. Those people with the flags on their trucks, those people yelling and protesting, those people with the yard signs and bumper stickers...those people in Charlotte...in Brooklyn...in Atlanta...in Dallas...in Portland. We're here, staying quiet with our people, not making any waves. Sure, we're probably gossiping with our friends about *them*, and probably sharing questionable memes and hate-filled messages on social media, and we're probably berating their intelligence and genetics...but we're not out *there* causing a ruckus. We're not the problem. We're being good Christians.

As Christians on both sides of the political spectrum, we've each claimed Jesus as being on our team. We've been fighting and arguing about which Christian is right...which is wrong...which is in...which is out. We've been yelling and screaming...shutting down and shutting out each other over abortion and capital punishment and what pro-life means, over welfare programs and self-sufficiency, over who receives healthcare and who will go bankrupt because of it, over who deserves to be a citizen and who needs to 'go back to where they came from'. Good Christians have been loudly proclaiming that we are right and *they* are wrong...good Christians have been loudly proclaiming a gospel...but is it *the* gospel? If we are Good Christians, then what the hell are we doing?

All of us – Republican, Democrat, and Independent – all of us who claim to be God-fearing, Jesus loving, Holy Spirit invoking Christians go about our lives with Jesus on our lips as we berate our brothers and sisters who don't agree with our politics. We shut out our parents and

children who vote differently than us. We yell at our neighbors and friends who hold different values. We put *our* ideals and desires...*our* laws and *our* politicians and *our* politics ahead of our neighbors and ahead of God. We demonize our enemies and turn into devils those who oppose our theologies, our politics, our social ideals. We have failed to follow those two commandments offered up by Jesus, those two commandments upon which everything else hangs upon: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.¹

When Jesus spoke those words to the questioning lawyer, he wasn't offering up new information. Jesus cites Hebrew scriptures because he believes in the divine authority of the Word. Jesus reminds those who were surrounding him and questioning him that we were made to love, and that love is paramount to anything else in this world. Jesus' double-love command gives humans a direction to face and a way to be.²

In giving the first – “love the Lord your God” – Jesus is giving the lawyer direction. Jesus is telling him that his orientation need not be on the Tanakh...nor on merely the Torah...but on the Lord *your* God. The God of his ancestors. The God of his people. The lawyer wasn't directed to love a god – he was directed to love the Lord *your* God – “the God who has already done great saving things for his people and for the world,”³ the God who knew him intimately and who he knew intimately. Jesus – in speaking these words – was reorienting the lawyer's direction and way of thinking.

And in giving the second – “love your neighbor as yourself” – Jesus is giving the lawyer a way to be...a way to live. When Jesus quoted this Leviticus text, he knew full-well that the lawyer knew the context of the passage. The love of neighbor is a decision not to seek revenge against or cherish anger toward the other, it's the decision to have tender regard for him and to seek the active promoting of his good. However, the preceding verse in Leviticus also mandates a rebuking of the neighbor when necessary – comparable to Jesus' command to confront a sinning brother. So, when Jesus says to “love your neighbor as yourself,” he's commanding to give neighbor fuel, food, resources, motivation, and purpose...but Jesus is also reminding the

¹ Matthew 22:37-39

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew : A Commentary, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 412.

³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew : A Commentary, Vol. 2*, 412.

lawyer to have frank discussions with ‘errant’ neighbors. Jesus – in speaking these words – was reminding the lawyer of how to live and how to be in the world.⁴

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” As we hear these timeless words this morning we all can readily admit that this is not new information...but are we actually living out these two greatest commands? Jesus isn’t commanding us to perform signs and wonders...he’s not asking us to perform miracles...he’s not commanding us to heal...he’s commanding us to agape love, to ultimate love. To self-sacrificing love. To relational love. To correcting love. Jesus is pointing us to the kind of love that is not of this world, but can only come from God.

Jesus, in telling us good Christians to love our God, is reminding us that God is the ultimate in this world. God, who is over Trump and Biden, Democrats and Republicans. God, who is over our laws, referendums, and decisions. The Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty⁵ - who will be here for generations to come. We must be oriented in *that* direction... centered on and madly in love with our God.

And Jesus, in telling us good Christians to love our neighbor, is reminding us of the right way to live. We are to give loving attention to each member of the world that passes us by on any given day. We love those who we see, who we interact with, who we meet, who we know. We love those who vote differently than we do. We love those who look differently than we do. We love those who love differently than we do. We love those who are angry at us...those who are ignoring us...those who we are ignoring.

And in our love, we, as good Christians, correct. We correct injustices done to the vulnerable children separated from their parents on the border. We correct corrupt police officers, the governments that underfund and the departments that undertrain. We correct the misuses of resources, from poor government spending to poor oversight. We correct the racist, sexist, homophobic and demoralizing rhetoric that is spoken by our leaders, our neighbors, and our friends. We correct because we are oriented on God and because we love.

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, 415-417.

⁵ Revelation 1:8

Good Christians, the end of the election is near...but our race is not over. We will continue to see hatred, violence, anger, demeaning language and shameful actions. We will continue to witness the pain and fear and anxiety of those around us. But here's the good news: God has sovereignty over this earth and has ultimate authority. God has done and is doing good things. Let's rest in that knowledge, and let's do those things which we are called to do: love the God who loves you, and cherish the person who meets you. Seriously.