

CURRENT ISSUES

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Our Angle Into Today's Political Wind

Truly my soul finds rest in God;
my salvation comes from him.
Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
Psalm 62: 1-2

Pastors: the stewards of ultimate things…
From Marilynne Robinson's *Home*

As the current election cycle and inauguration play out, I want to help clergy think about transcendent things and to discover how to follow Jesus and to love God, neighbor, and enemy in our moment of multiple crises. I am especially hopeful that the following thoughts might be a framework for navigating our era of political turmoil and division. My intention is to work against the proliferation of conflict and moral confusion and to give clergy both a place to stand and a basis to teach and lead.

Because I advocate for a Jesus-shaped interaction with modern partisan politics, I need to be clear that I am not anti-government or anti-politics. I submit to the biblical revelation that there is a God-given and good role for human agency in the form of government, governmental leaders, law and law enforcement (Romans 13:1; Mark 12:17; 1 Timothy 2:1-20). I do not believe that politics and politicians are "of the world" or "of the Enemy." I start with the notion that God gave us the mandate for social structures that are meant to help humans live well in societies: championing justice, working in, through and for compassion. This, of course, best comes to pass through leaders of integrity who seek to make and enforce laws that ensure freedom and holistic human health for all.

That said, there is a proper biblical foundation for thinking about political engagement. I think it runs along the following lines. We do not first ask: "To what political party do I belong?" nor "What color (red, blue or purple) is my state or city?" nor "For which person will I vote?" Rather we must first ask: "Who is my Maker (Psalm 139)?" "In what *covenant* am I a participant—what promises have I made to God?" "As creature, what responsibilities do I have to the Creator?" "What patterns of life are implied by a primary allegiance to God (Genesis 12:1-3)?" "Who is my Master Teacher for life (Matthew 10:28,29)?"

Thus, what I encourage below assumes the good role of civil life and civic leaders. But it also seeks to say something about society that is both timely and grounded in a transcendent biblical world view.

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Human life, as *Imago Dei*, is meant to be an expression of the Divine life within the multifaceted affairs of the world. Image-bearing is also meant to be a transcendent basis for engaging with the various matters of human life. Jesus' daily spirituality included mere human arrangements but was never reduced to or controlled by them. Jesus interacted with the down-to-earth political/civil world within an overall relationship with his Father—the world's one, true Creator God.

This dynamic is clear in Jesus' conversation with Pilate (John 19:10,11). Pilate threatens Jesus:

Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?

Jesus, knowing the source of real, ultimate power, and knowing he was in the care of that Personal Power, answered:

You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.

This experiential knowledge made Jesus safe and thus courageous. Death is the most heart-pounding, gut-wrenching human fear. This is why death threats are often a cruel tool for tyranny, control and manipulation. These threats can be made against persons, tribes, villages, cities and even nations. For instance, we are hearing from both sides that "If so-and-so is elected president, that will be the end [i.e., the death] of America." Once that threat is made, it becomes the basis for the "anything goes," hate-filled interactions that are now upon us.

But we are not stuck there. We are free in Christ. The resurrection is real. A new world is born, and we can practice the resurrected life as this new world comes into its fullness. If our identity is *in Christ*, not in a city, tribe or nation, then Christlike security and courageousness is possible for us too. Being in *Christ's new world* frees us to engage in the attitudes and behaviors we will need in the campaign run-up to the election, the probable election trauma and what is likely to be both a celebrated and protested inauguration. Being in the world but not of it, having our real citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20), we live and move and have our being under eternal, ultimate authority and power (Acts 17:28).

This dynamic, relational gift empowers us to responsibly and effectively stand for *the good* in the human affairs in which we have actual contact. This is the ultimate meaning of *election*, of *salvation*. Entirely by grace we are forgiven, redeemed, reconciled, regenerated and sanctified, called and sent. This *Life in Christ* has three foci. 1) It is God-ward, such as in prayer and worship. 2) It is personal, in terms of formation in Christlikeness. 3) It is outward, in that we are called to be ambassadors of God's kingdom and agents of his love and goodness.

In human affairs, the *good* is defined by God's intention in creation. That means goodness is not defined by any other source—including politicians, political parties or political platforms. Governments and their leaders may or may not seek to discern and manifest in their person and policies *the good of God*. But they do not have the power to invent good out of the blue. True good is found only in those things that are in harmony with God's intention. And while politicians—and we—can be mistaken or sinful and stand against the good for now, someday the full goodness of God will have ultimate sway over the whole cosmos and all its systems.

Firm Ground on Which to Stand

We live, move, vote and are active best by standing on that solid eschatological ground—in reality, not just on something in which we are "supposed" to believe. But the truthfulness, the reliability of our future hope is challenged every day. Almost every assertion by politicians, medical personnel, economists, social justice activists and religious leaders is now attacked as fake news, half-truths, parts of conspiracy theories, or deliberate and outright lies made up to manipulate people. This pattern of dealing with reality is an abuse of human dignity and grievously sinful before God. Seeking, finding and knowing truth is crucial to peaceful human life. It is also core to the promotion of God's *good*—those things which are grounded in his creative intention. Without truth, we cannot seek, find and share the wisdom we need to thrive in our complex world.

Whatever else you might think of public policy, I encourage you to think this: Good, ethical, workable public policy is exceedingly difficult in modern, pluralistic, post-Christian democracies. It takes love, patience, wisdom, genuinely seeking the good of the other—and doing so in ways that honor those with whom we disagree. That may sound Pollyanna-ish, but do we have any good, long-term options? In the short term, spinning the truth, fake news, dissembling and trashing others may achieve one's goals. But it ultimately diminishes and weakens us personally and socially.

Cases in point: When we engage in name calling to get our way or win an argument, we do so precisely with the hope and intent that people will reject, mock and dismiss the person(s) we are smearing. It often works like this:

1) Someone is trying to create positive change to better care for a marginalized segment of society.

2) The change scares me—I don't like it because I might not fully understand the issue, may have heard rumors about it, or may not want it to change my life in uncertain ways.

3) Needing to get my way, I end up attacking half the American voting public, saying, "Only a fool would vote for that person/that change—he/she is a Marxist, socialist idiot!"

It can and does work the other way around too:

1) Holding a certain social norm valuable, someone tries to conserve or preserve an element of society.

2) I am then alarmed because I think the thing being saved is unjust or unworkable, etc.

3) Needing to get heard and achieve my goal, I attack the other half the American voting public, saying: "He/she is a hater, fascist jerk!"

But at some point, we are going to need and want to work alongside those with whom we disagree. For instance, a major earthquake or fire strikes California, a series of deadly tornadoes hit the Midwest, or a hurricane bludgeons the East Coast. As you step out on your porch, you survey the damage. It is overwhelming and you feel the acute need for help. In the next moment, chill-bumps radiate across your body as you realize that in the cause of partisan politics, you have denigrated, vilified and disparaged half your neighbors. They now need your help. You need their loving generosity. The political processes that have fomented and supported our divisions cannot do it. The well-intentioned actions of government are not fast enough, nimble enough, *personal* enough. Governmental action cannot replace community in which we will each other's good. We need each other. We were designed by God to live in communities where neighbors will each other's good. This can only happen when we love and think the best of each other.

The Most Important Issue

I am making the case that whatever else may be said or done in the next four-and-a-half months, the most important issue before us is: how to love God, neighbor and enemy. Election cycles come and go. Politicians rise to fame and ultimately die. Systems of government constantly evolve under the pressure of shifting human concerns. But look out your window. If you are lucky, you can see something constant—a tree, a mountain, a desert or an ocean that was there before you were born and will be there long after you are dead. God and your neighbor—even your enemy—are like that. They are of enduring significance.

You have been born again into, and will die within, the story of God. It includes human arrangements for society and its leaders, but cannot be reduced to them. We honor just and striving-to-be-just systems and leaders—but always under God, our King. We seek life in, and alignment to, his kingdom. No other rival can own us.

Which Game? Whose Rules?

Don't get reduced. Don't let the exigencies of a political cycle, the rhetoric of campaign managers and the talking heads who do their bidding on radio or television lead you to justify *harming others for the cause*. When we close ranks in our echo chambers, we become ever more insular, defensive, retaliatory, more "us-versus-them" in our thinking. As Christ-followers, we don't want to let divisive political systems lead us to view our fellow Americans or even church friends—those with whom we commonly relate, and may someday need—as *the enemy*. That is the political game—and it is antithetical to the reality of the kingdom of God. This means we can stop using the language of war. Our brother or sister in Christ is never our enemy.

What if the next 120 days were marked not by civil *warfare* carried out in media(s), but by caring for one's close relationships—families, neighbors, co-workers, classmates, etc.? Don't think, "I must fix everything." Just seek the good in local, relational ways. What issues are on your doorstep? Get started and see where the Spirit takes you. Don't judge yourself. Have childlike joy in whatever you undertake. For *whoever becomes humble like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 18:4).

Our aim in this season is to be the kinds of people who, from divinely renovated depths, take our place in social structures to the end that we contribute to their long-term transformation, allowing *justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream* (Amos 5:24, NRSV).

Who doesn't love that sentence from Amos! But it can seem like a wish-dream. Bombarded by conflicting tweets, hostile posts, angry and mean comments, we can be forgiven for wondering: How do I decide what and who to value? How do I decide what and who to believe? That common and understandable confusion is why political discourse is never our first language. Our first language, which includes social intelligence, is rooted in Jesus and his kingdom revolution. It is rooted in *a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that our faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power* (1 Corinthians 2:4b,5).

At the end of it all, we do not seek conformity with the political left, the right or the independent. In various moments and on various topics, each cultural faction is sometimes right and other times wrong. But none of them is ever determinative of, or worthy of, our ultimate loyalty and commitment. Why? Because no political ideology is sophisticated and nuanced enough to anticipate and heal the complex, multifaceted brokenness of humanity. Only God in Christ is capable of that. To him, to his ideals and his purposes, we give our allegiance. As we vote and engage in our civil duties, we do so by asking: "Who/what best promotes human flourishing in alignment with the creative intention of God?"

Practices for the Present Moment

I close by suggesting a few spiritual practices for the coming months:

Respect: In civic contexts, respect is normally meant to convey due regard for the feelings, convictions, rights or traditions of others. But similar to Jesus' sayings of "Go the extra mile" or "Give them your coat too," followers of Jesus can take *respect* further—into realms of *loving* the *Imago Dei* in others, bringing healing, relief and freedom. How? By coming to *cherish* and *treasure* others. It is amazing the behaviors that are automatically ruled out (or in) by cherishing and treasuring something. Think of the care given to prized antique cars, to china or silver passed on from several generations ago, or to a rare, perfect baseball card. Now imagine treating people of the other political party in that way. God already does. Does that surprise you? Do you assume God must belittle and hate those of the party to which you do not belong? Silly when you think about it, right? I dare to imagine tens of millions of people coming to cherish and treasure each other. May it happen to such an extent that the current vendors of animosity have no more customers.

Non-Anxious Connection with Difference: Being with or maintaining relationship with someone does not mean you agree with everything they believe or value. Women and men in Paul's day were not on the same page about loads of issues. The same was true between slave and free, Jews, Greeks, Barbarians and Scythians. Yet as Paul says, "Christ is all and in all" (Colossians 3:11), and we are all one in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28). Staying in the room with difference is not compromise. It is staying close to that which God is most committed: the human beings he is presently shaping into his image. You can retain your mind, convictions and values while simultaneously staying in loving relationship with those with whom you disagree. This is done all the time in families and friendships. Other people simply "live with it," thinking to themselves: "I have no other choice." But in those cases, bitterness and resentment often grow. We want to model *staying connected* in something else: the knowledge that we are part of the *one* new humanity, humbly realizing that we all see through a glass darkly and have beams in our eyes. The invitation is to stay lovingly near to each other's error—all the while seeking truth together so others will benefit by the truth we discover.

Generosity: This is the inner stance, posture or readiness to, without strings attached, give more than what is strictly necessary or expected in a given situation. It is an idea and practice born in the person of God and reflected to us in creation, salvation and preservation—things that are abundantly more than any human could expect or hope. It is a lavish, openhanded giving (God gave his only Son!). A core biblical aspect of generosity is willingly giving, with sincerity, to those we may hold to be undeserving. Generously giving the benefit of the doubt to others is far superior to the now-routine responses of judgment and condemnation. In this season, can we give each other space? Can we stop comparing our best with each other's worst? Can we let people be just *wrong-in-my-view,* not evil, loser idiots? Even *idiots* are full of Divine potential—as are ordinary, confused people. Consider the story of Mother Mary—most would have thought of her as "nuts" or a "liar," when in actuality she was the human bearer of the Divine. Likewise, the post-Jesus Church as

we know it is inconceivable without Paul. But imagine the religiously fueled, partisan-based things that people could have said about him! Thank God that the hopeful, loving and obedient heart of Barnabas *(the son of generous encouragement)* was able to get past fear and accusation to see divine potential in Paul.

Can we come to see that those "on the other side," like us, are growing, learning, evolving people? Can we see others with hope, not judgment? Can we see the image of God that lies behind the *talking points* we hear passed on from others? Generosity needs to be, and can be, cultivated. In important ways, it is an indicator of the condition of one's soul, determining our ability for action-based love. Those who are most generous are able to do so because they know this deeply in their heart:

I am like an olive tree
flourishing in the house of God;
I trust in God's unfailing love
for ever and ever.
Psalm 52:8

A few breezes have come together to form a strong wind that is blowing against everyone in this last part of 2020. We make headway by properly angling our sails into the wind. I've shared a few thoughts that I hope will help you set your sail. As you seek to navigate the troubled waters ahead, you have my utmost respect and love for the work you do in your church and your community.

May the Master pour on the love so it fills your life and
splashes over on everyone around you.
(1 Thessalonians 3:12, The Message)