

The Politics of Love
Romans 13:8–14
Sunday, September 6, 2020

Last Friday, news broke about the death of Chadwick Boseman, the 43-year-old actor whose on-screen roles included baseball player Jackie Robinson, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, and the superhero Black Panther (among many others). His death came as a shock, as he had privately lived with colon cancer for the past four years, and a lot of people were deeply affected by it, not just because of who he was *on* the screen, but also who he was *off* the screen – by all accounts, a *good, kind, generous* person who had a profound impact on the people around him.

After hearing about his death, I realized that I had never seen *Black Panther*, arguably his biggest movie, in which he plays T'Challa, king of the African nation of Wakanda, and his alter ego, the superhero Black Panther. So I decided to watch it the following night. There was a part at the end where he is addressing the United Nations as King T'Challa, and he says this, “We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe.”

It struck me how timely that message was in light of *our* current events. This was Saturday night that I watched it, and just a few days earlier, protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin turned violent, with a 17-year-old shooting three protestors, killing two of them. And then as I was watching the movie, news broke of a protestor shooting and killing a counter-protestor in Portland, Oregon. Those are just two examples, but there are obviously countless more of the ways that the

illusions of division threaten our very existence. And it made me think about how we, as the Church of Jesus Christ, can work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. How we can bear witness to the truth that more *connects* us than *separates* us. How we can build *bridges* instead of *barriers*. And how we can look after one another as if we were one single tribe. Sarah Weisiger, the new pastor over at Trinity in Berwyn, expressed this sentiment well when she asked, “What would it look like for us, as Christians, to resist the name calling, the viciousness, and the divisive rhetoric of the political season we are in?”

Now, I know that for some of us, this might be treading on uncomfortable ground, because we say that we shouldn’t talk about politics in church. And I’m especially mindful of that sensitivity in a time when we cannot physically be together. It seems unfair and one-sided; not a conversation. But bear with me a moment. Because we have talked before about how the word *politics* comes from the Greek word *polis*, which means city or state (think of the word *metropolis*), any group of people intentionally living together; a community of people. So politics has to do with the art or process of people living together in community. It’s not just about government or issues. It’s about how we make life work so that we can live together. Anything that deals with how people live life together is political. And so in that sense, the messages of Jesus and Paul and scripture as a whole were inherently political because they were teaching people how to live life together in the Kingdom of God. The church is a political body, because we are trying to master the art of living together in the name of Jesus Christ.

The *distinction* that we need to make is that, while Jesus was political in his message, he was not *partisan*. The word *partisan* comes from a word that means, “part.” It’s about how we try to divide our life together into different parts; how we separate ourselves from each other. Our

calling here is not to divide but to bring the parts together, to help us live together in the midst of our perceived differences. That is something that St. John's has been very intentional about throughout our history. Not being a "liberal" church or a "conservative" church, because those are *partisan* labels that *divide*. Those are labels of the kingdom of *man*, not the Kingdom of *God*. We strive to be a church where *all people* can come to be a part of something *greater*, to be part of a bigger family in Christ, to *know* each other and *love* each other even in the midst of our differences.

One of the biggest challenges we face right now is that *so many people* have allowed partisan labels to form the primary identities of their lives; to define and shape every other aspect of our lives, including our faith. But as followers of Jesus Christ, our politics – our approach to living life together – must be shaped by the message of Jesus, and not the other way around. We can't let our *politics* shape our understanding of the message of Jesus. We have to look to Jesus *first*. And the core message of Jesus is love of God and love of neighbor. *That* is what must take priority above any partisan labels in our lives. Theologian Michael Svigel says, "The question should never be, 'Is this action leftist or right-wing, liberal or conservative, socialist or capitalist?' The question should be, 'Does this action love my neighbor...look out for their interests more than my own...manifest the fruit of the Spirit?'"¹

I came across a quote this week by an author and theologian named Israel Kamudzandu, who says, "The main challenge of our time is to live with a transformed mind, a mind that is open to the other and leads to inner transformation. It is crucial for Christians to consider each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life, and to live each day beyond the self."² So over the next couple of weeks, as we follow along with the lectionary, we are going to be looking at

¹ <https://twitter.com/Svigel/status/1295554171706408960>

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4567

Paul's letters to the Romans and the Philippians with that quote in mind. How do these texts call us to consider each human being as a loving partner on the journey of life and to live each day beyond the self? And we're going to start this week with Romans 13.

Now, you might be wondering why we're talking about politics with this scripture reading. But Romans 13 is arguably one of the most politically controversial chapters in the Bible! It's just that, for our reading today, the lectionary *skips* the part that's so challenging. At the beginning of this chapter, Paul writes, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever *resists* authority resists what God has appointed." Some people hear that and say, "So, Hitler and the Nazis were appointed by God, and we're just supposed to be subject to them? If I resist a brutal dictatorship, I am resisting what God has appointed?" There is a whole lot we could say about that, but for our purposes today, you can see how that could be controversial.

Paul goes on to talk about the need to pay taxes because the authorities are God's servants, and he says, "Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Paul seems here to be voicing unequivocal support for the governing authorities, no matter *who* they are or how *bad* they are. Again, there is a whole lot we could say about *that*, but the reason I'm mentioning it today is because it helps provide context for the passage that we are looking at. Because in the very next verse, after Paul says, "Pay to all what is due to them," – the word for *due* there is a Greek word that also gets translated as *owed*, "Pay to all what is *owed* to them," – the very next thing he says is, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another."

Now obviously that doesn't mean that they're going to be okay with it if, instead of paying your taxes or your mortgage, you just say, "But I *love* you!" But one way to understand what Paul is saying here is that, as Christians, we are called to love. Of course, but what I mean by that is that we can't control what *others* do. To some extent we can't control whether the governing authorities are going to *use* their authority for good or for evil. You can't control whether this other person agrees with you politically or not. But what you *can* do is *love*. To do everything that *you* do out of love for God and your neighbor. And *love*, as Paul says elsewhere, is speaking and acting in ways that show patience and kindness, not being envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, not insisting on your own way, not being irritable or resentful, not rejoicing in wrongdoing but rejoicing in the truth, bearing with people, believing in them, hoping for them, not giving up on them, and praying for them. *That*, Paul says, is what we owe to each other. And the one thing we have control over is our ability to do that, to respond in ways that are loving.

This isn't to say that our disagreements and divisions aren't *real*. In some cases they *are*. But even *when* they are, you can *still* choose to respond in ways that show patience and kindness and love. The other person may not. But *you can*. Even if you view someone as your *enemy* based on their political views – which you *should not do*, but even if you do – how does Jesus call us to *treat* our enemies? With love. Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven." Paul says just a few verses before this, "Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. So far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all." And Jesus says that if people *do* persecute you for living in this way, if they take advantage of you and hate you and even *kill* you, then your reward is great in heaven, and the Kingdom of God belongs to *you*.

No matter what this other person *believes*, you can love them. No matter what they *do*, you can love them. That doesn't mean you have to *agree* with them or condone their behavior. We don't have to *agree* in order to *love*. It may be the hardest, most painful thing you have ever done in your life, but Jesus does not call us to what is *easy*. The way of Christ is narrow and hard, but it is the way that leads to *life*.

As Christians, we do not owe loyalty to political parties or partisan ideologies. The only thing we *owe* is *love*, to God and to each other. We are not called to put on red or blue, elephants or donkeys. Paul calls us here to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” and to bow down before the lamb of God. The way that we resist the name calling, viciousness, and divisive rhetoric of this political season is by choosing to live in love. By considering *each human being* – even the ones we disagree with – as a loving partner on the journey of life and to live each day beyond the self. By building *bridges* instead of *barriers* and looking after one another as if we were *one single tribe*...because we *are*.

Eventually, the divisiveness and violence of this political season will pass, and we will be left with one another. The way that we will be able to live with one another *after* it is by loving one another *through* it. Because in the end, the world will know us – the world will know *Christ* – not through our partisan affiliation or political ideologies, but through our *love*. By speaking and acting in ways that honor God and care for each other.

So let us come to God together now, lifting one another up in prayer, and asking God's blessing on *all* our brothers and sisters. Let us pray.