

Cultivating the Kingdom
Luke 19:28–40
Sunday, April 10, 2022 (Palm Sunday)

Last week we talked about Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, where he calls us to love, not just our *neighbors*, but also our *enemies*. Because our enemies are also our neighbors, children of God, created in the image of God. We talked about how *loving* our enemies (or the people we disagree with) is not just a *feeling* or *emotion* that we have toward them. Love is found in the ways that we *act* with them; the ways that we show them patience and kindness and generosity and hope. The ways that we do not insist on our own way with them. It's about *caring* for the people we disagree with – *taking care* of them. Never resorting to retaliation or violence but, Paul says, so far as it depends on you, living peaceably with all.

And as soon as worship ended, I heard from quite a few people the question that I had *expected* to hear after that sermon. It's not a *bad* question; it's actually a *really good* question. It's the question that *always* comes up after we hear *that* message from Jesus and Paul. "What about *Hitler*? What about *bin Laden*? What about *Putin*?" Are we supposed to love *them*, take care of *them*, show them patience and turn the other cheek while they kill thousands if not millions of people? How do you live peaceably with others when it *does not* depend on you? When it seems like the only option to stop *them* from taking lives is to take *theirs*? There is a part of us that thinks, "Yeah, Jesus, that's nice in *theory*, but this is the *real world*." To that I would say, "You're talking about the real world, and I'm talking about the one who *created it*."

But let's *talk* about the "real world" then. In order to *do* that, though, we have to talk about *politics*. And some of your pews suddenly became very uncomfortable. Like, "I just came here for the egg hunt today!" Bear with me. Trust me. I am your pastor. I take that very seriously. I care about you. I would not do anything to jeopardize the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

I made promises to that end in my ordination. I'm actually going to be borrowing very heavily right now from a sermon that I heard a few months ago by a pastor and author named Brian Zahnd.¹ This question of the church in relation to politics is one that I have wrestled with for years now – it's actually a major part of my doctoral work – and Zahnd's sermon was kind of a breakthrough for me that helped me to think about all of this in a new way. So I wanted to share it with you.

Zahnd says that the word *politics* makes us nervous, and for good reason. In the *best* of times, politics can be contentious and divisive. And we do not *live* in the best of times. In more troubled times, politics can be toxic, corrupt, dangerous, and even deadly. Currently in the United States and in many other places around the world, the level of political acrimony and sectarian hate is dangerously high. So the anxiety that can occur when the topic of politics comes up is understandable. But we live in a political world.

Now, there is a *difference* between the word *political* and the word *partisan*. And I think *that* is where our anxiety comes from. We get nervous when churches start talking about *politics* because they might become *partisan*, they might “take a side,” and that *worries* us, at least if the side they take is different from *our own*. But the word *politics* comes from the Greek word *polis*, which means, “city.” Politics is the organized attempt to attend to the affairs of the *polis*, the *city*, the society in which we live. Because we *have* to live together. That's how we are as humans. And as civilization advances, we are more and more connected and dependent on one another. So we have to figure out how to live together. That's the question that politics attempts to answer: How do we live life together?

¹ Brian Zahnd, “The Politics of Heaven” <https://youtu.be/uUeWMnvGrKw>

We live in an political world, and Palm Sunday is a political event. Jesus enters Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, riding a donkey, which is meant to make a mockery of the Roman king who rides into town on a *war horse*. This is a different kind of king who's coming to town. The people lay their cloaks on the road in front of him and start waving palm branches (the national flower of Israel, so to speak), and they start chanting, "Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord." What is happening here is a reenactment of the enthroning of a king as it took place in the Old Testament. There are stories where *this same thing* happens when Israel inaugurates a new king. They weren't just making this up on Palm Sunday 2,000 years ago. This has a much longer history. The people are heralding Jesus as the new king of Israel. And not a just *spiritual* king. They think he is going to be a *political* king who sits on the throne of his ancestor King David and raises up an army to drive out their Roman occupiers. They *misunderstand*, but nevertheless, this is an undeniably political event. Palm Sunday is a political day. We live in a political world.

Now, Brian Zahnd outlines three kinds of politics. First, he says, there is the politics of *earth*. This is human beings attempting to organize society in a way that achieves the common good and seeks goodness and equality for as many as possible. Sometimes we *get* there, sometimes we *don't*, but that's the *goal*. The politics of earth is what we are used to. It's the elections we vote in. This is the day-to-day political stuff that we are familiar with. The politics of earth.

Next, Zahnd says, there is the politics of *hell*. The politics of hell is when the principalities and the powers are given over to the satanic, by which he means the politics of hell become manifest when it's only and all about *power*. The common good is no longer the motivation or the pursuit. It's all about attaining and retaining power. And when power becomes the sole object of political pursuit, justice is trampled underfoot.

There is evil in this world. And that evil *can* and *has* become manifest in *people*. Now, we have to be careful there, because there is a tendency (especially lately) to say, “This person I disagree with is *evil*.” That allows us to *dehumanize* them and even justify violence against them. We cannot be quick to judge and write someone off as evil just because they disagree with us. So we have to be really careful there. But I think that we *can* look at the world and see some pretty clear examples of the politics of hell. Hitler. The genocide in Rwanda. And many now would say Putin. It is all about power and domination at the expense of others.

So the politics of earth is our flawed and feeble attempt at order and justice. It’s never perfect. It oscillates between better and worse. The politics of hell, Zahnd says, is Satan ruling the world through those corrupted by power. And that brings tremendous suffering to the vast majority that live in that kind of system.

But, Zahnd says, there is also the politics of *heaven*. The politics of heaven cannot originate on earth. Because, as God says through the prophet Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts. Nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” Heaven is on a higher level than us. And left to ourselves, we will never *think* like heaven. So if the politics of heaven are to come to earth, someone will have to bring them from heaven to earth for us. And, of course, this is Jesus Christ. Jesus is God in human flesh, come to earth, to be with us as one of us, and so the things that Jesus says and does are a reflection of the very mind and heart of God. Jesus is not giving us some vague outline of the thoughts of God or the ideas of God. Jesus is the human manifestation of God, and so *his* thoughts are *God’s* thoughts, *his* ways are *God’s* ways.

So what *is* that? What is God's way? What are the politics of heaven? Well, this is what we talked about last week in the Sermon on the Mount. Zahnd summarizes Jesus' teaching there, and thus the politics of heaven, in 40 words:

Love your enemies.
Do good to those who hate you.
Bless those who curse you.
Turn the other cheek.
Do unto others as you would have them do to you.
LOVE YOUR ENEMIES.
Be merciful as your Father is merciful.

That is the politics of heaven. That is the way that *God* wants to order our life together. And God came from heaven to earth in Jesus Christ to show us that. "Here is how you can love God and love your neighbor. Here is how you can live *at one* with God and with each other." The politics of heaven.

The only *problem* is, the politics of heaven do not give us a specific politics for earth. If *this* became the law of the land (Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Turn the other cheek. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. Be merciful as your Father is merciful.), if that was our constitution, does that mean that I can drive 100 mph on 202? We need a little more detail. The politics of heaven may *inform* things, but it does not *specifically outline* a set of laws that we can live by. There's just a whole lot more that we have to work out. We still have to figure out how to live together politically as best we can.

So, Zahnd says, this means that you are free to embrace whatever politics of earth seem best to you...*but* (and this is a *big* but) the politics of heaven must hold precedence over your politics of earth. In other words, you can hold to whatever particular political theory, political ideas you want, *as long as* you love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse

you. Turn the other cheek. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. Be merciful as your Father is merciful. That's the catch. That's the thing that holds precedence. That's what it means to actually follow Jesus. Once you confess Jesus as Lord, this is non-negotiable. You can't say, "Jesus is Lord, but I'm not going to love my enemy!" That's when Jesus says things like, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do what I say? I think you're not understanding this *Lord* part."

If you allow your politics of earth to push aside the politics of heaven, your politics of earth will become the politics of hell. What it means, Zahnd says, is that you'll bow down to the devil. So you can hold on to your politics of earth; you can have your political opinions and preferences. You can line up on the left, the right, whatever side you want, *as long as* you love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Turn the other cheek. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. Be merciful as your Father is merciful. As long as you do that, then you can hold to your politics of earth. But if you say, "I can't love them! They're *liberal*. They're *conservative*. They're a Democrat. They're a Republican. I can't love them!" Then your politics of earth will degenerate into the politics of hell as you bow down before the devil.

So you can be a Democrat. You can be a Republican. You can be liberal. You can be conservative. You cannot hate. You cannot be mean. You cannot be unkind. You can be a *kind* Republican or a *kind* Democrat. You can be a *kind* conservative or a *kind* liberal. You just can't be mean. You can't be hateful. You can't be resentful. You can't be retaliatory. You can't be violent. You have to be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful.

Palm Sunday asks the question of us, “What does it look like to live in the Kingdom of God while we are here on earth, under the rule and reign, the power and authority of Jesus Christ?” I can’t tell you what to do about *Hitler* or *Putin*. I mean, I *can* tell you, you’re just not going to *like* it. Because Jesus calls us to love our enemies as *he did*, even to the point of death. Even if it costs us our lives. Because, Jesus says, “*Blessed* are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (for doing the right thing), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *Blessed* are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great (not on *earth* but) in heaven. *Blessed* are the *meek* (not the strong or powerful or violent), for *they* will inherit the earth. *Blessed* are the *merciful*, for they will receive mercy.” Christ calls us to take up our cross and follow him, and the way of the cross is the way of suffering and death. But it is also the way of *love*, it is the way of *mercy*, it is the way of forgiveness and new life, and it is the way of *Christ*.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not in any hurry to stop living this life. And if I was faced with a situation like in Ukraine where my *children*, my *family* was under the imminent threat of death? I can’t tell you what I would do. I really don’t know. Trying to follow the way of Jesus does not necessarily make this life *easier*. But here’s what Brian Zahnd’s sermon sparked in me, and maybe this is where we start. Thinking of the politics of earth, the politics of hell, and the politics of heaven in this way reminds us of two things.

First, it reminds us that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. When Jesus stood before Pilate, his last chance to save his own life, he said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it *was*, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But my kingdom is not from here.” So many people, so many *Christians*, get so consumed with power here on earth that they are willing to *fight* and do *anything* to get close to the throne. But like Jesus says, “What

does it matter if you gain the whole world but lose your *soul* in the process?” Christ’s kingdom is not of this world. *We* are focused on something *greater* than this world. Something that will *outlast* this world and life here on it. We are not going to *bring about* the Kingdom of God. Only God can do that. *Our* calling is that we have *seen* the Kingdom of God embodied in Jesus Christ, we know what it is *like*, and we are called to live in ways that show the world what the Kingdom of God is like. So as we participate in the politics of earth, we cannot lose sight of the fact that we belong to a different kingdom that is not *of* this world.

The *other* thing that this way of thinking about politics reminds us of, *because* Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, “Our struggle,” as Paul writes to the Ephesians, “is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). If you are liberal, if you are conservative, Republican or Democrat, American or Russian, my struggle is not against *you*. Our struggle is not against *one another*. It is against the powers of evil. And the way that we *fight* the powers of evil is not with *more evil*. It is not with hatred or violence or killing. And we are not going to *legislate* the powers of evil out of existence. We fight the powers of evil by loving our enemies. Doing good to those who hate us. Blessing those who curse us. Turning the other cheek. Doing unto others as we would have them do to us. LOVING OUR ENEMIES. Being merciful as our Father in heaven is merciful. The powers of evil cannot defeat the power of love, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, claiming victory over the power of sin and death. The battle has already been won.

You can be a Democrat, Republican, conservative, liberal – our struggle is not against one another. But when we are claimed by God in baptism, we are called to lay *those* labels aside for a new one: child of God. We know that there aren’t going to be Republicans or Democrats or

liberals or conservatives in heaven, right? We know that, don't we? Those words do not define who you are. You are a child of God, created in the image of God. You *belong* to God. You do not belong to the Republican party or the Democratic party. You do not belong to the liberal movement or the conservative movement. You do not belong to America. You belong to God. And so does that other person. And so, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Turn the other cheek. Do unto others as you would have them do to you. LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful. In *that* way, we live in the Kingdom of God, under the rule and reign of Christ our King, to whom be the glory now and forever. Amen.