

Courageous Conversations

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

September 5, 2021

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Hello beloved, how are you doing? I mean, how are you really doing, as pandemic statistics in the news are now accompanied by reports about Federal election campaign reports? Some among us enjoy politics, some not so much, but growing up in church I was told regularly that church and politics don't mix. I wonder what Jesus would say about that if he were here.

In his first year in seminary, founder of Sojourners, Jim Wallis¹, did a study with his fellow seminarians to find every verse in the Bible that deals with the poor and social injustice. They came up with thousands, in the first three Gospels one out of ten verses, in Luke one out of seven! Yet they could not recall a single sermon on the poor in their home churches. Here is an exercise *not* to try at home: one of them found an old Bible and began to cut out every single biblical text about the poor. There wasn't much left of the Psalms and books of the prophets.²

This message on the graphic, it is very thought provoking. The messaging: Love your neighbour who doesn't think like you, love like you, pray like you, vote like you...and so on. An Episcopal Church down the street from the White House during the Trump administration created this.³ It caught the attention of our leadership team at St. Andrew's, so much so that we covenanted to use it, to use it to help guide our decisions, our conversations.

Of course, we've heard the golden rule: Love your neighbour as yourself, a fundamental Commandment given by the Torah and reframed many times by Jesus of the Gospels. "Love your neighbour" as a basic principle is powerful, but this modern take on the commandment doesn't stop at love – it calls us to love people *unlike us*. It is time to reflect on the implications of this directive. Of course, Jesus didn't say it, literally. So, what do you think, would he approve this message? I suggest that he would.

Let's think theologically for a moment. I heard a great definition of politics, that wherever, in the public sphere, ideas and visions come into conflict, that is at the heart of politics. Why do so many of us find it so awkward to talk about our values that we hold dear about our community and what leaders we hope will achieve them? Maybe it's because those values are important to us, and in political discussions we discover that we differ. Perhaps talking values and politics is uncomfortable.

Can you recall any Gospel passages where Jesus taught about or acted in a way that made people uncomfortable? Today's Gospel has Jesus being approached by a woman

¹ For more about Jim Wallis and Sojourners, and their clarion call to preach and live justice in Washington, visit: <https://sojo.net/biography/jim-wallis>

² "Homiletical Perspective", of the James reading, Archie Smith Jr. *Feasting on the Word* – Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

³ All Souls Episcopal Church (a Diocese presided over by Bishop Michael Curry) created this banner, find out more: <http://www.allsoulsdc.org/neighbor>

who is not a Jew like Jesus. Jewish religious leaders would have been horrified to see Jesus with not only a strange woman but an impure non-Jewish woman!

There is no mention of a conversation with his friends after this encounter, but I imagine that there was tension:

Disciple: "Jesus, you shouldn't be doing this! It will get us all in trouble!"

Jesus: "What is more important: loving the neighbour or avoiding trouble?"

Disciple: "Well, loving the neighbour, but sometimes we need to be realistic!"

You get the idea.

Ideals and visions clashing – politics. Let's look at this Love Jesus speaks of, and its implications; it is not a fair-weather friend, but a daring love for all seasons. This love, as Paul frames it in his letter to the church in Corinth, "loves all things, bears all things, and so on."⁴

Love that is courageous, generous, patient, kind and sees the good in another person, not picking at their flaws. That is not my first instinct, I admit, when confronted by people whose politics not only differs from mine, but talking with this person leaves me literally vibrating with annoyance; I just want to leave. Do you have anyone like that? I picture a suburban street right now, dotted with NDP signs, and right in the middle, is a Conservative party sign.

What kind of conversations do *those* neighbours have? Perhaps it stays at niceties – it feels like Fall... yep. Two people who care enough about their country to put up a sign, but the visions, their core principles might be vastly different. Probably, most such neighbours or family members, just avoid that conversation – chalk it up to politics, stay away.

But hold on for a moment; remember that conversation in the Mark passage between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman? Jesus actually sounded a bit snobbish, perhaps racist. But he listened to the woman; *she changed his mind*.⁵ So, what do we make of this? Politically charged conversations can be awkward. Like sharing with someone what we believe – about God, sexual orientation, who I plan to vote for.

The Bible offers no easy wisdom about how to make these conversations less frightening – but I think it is quite clear that our Biblical stories encourage us to get out of our comfort zones and talk about important things. Faith without works is dead. Being a "participant" in this election, sharing ideas, and, for sure, if we have the privilege of voting, vote.

Seeing Jesus and the feisty, witty, woman as a model, we might see that at the heart of an important conversation is respect, humility and finding the best in the other person. Being cynical about peoples' intentions has been programmed into us by movies, social media. Honestly, time and again good leaders whom we have put on pedestals, the have fallen from grace. We have made a sport out of picking apart political, religious, corporate leaders. Maybe it's time to unlearn this cynical, jaded mindset, to approach

⁴ 1 Corinthians chapter 13

⁵ *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, ©2007 Mary McClintock Fulkerson. Oxford University Press.

conversations with others finding good in them in spite of the colour of the sign on their lawn.

What values do you hold as precious about your nation? The economy? Caring for Creation? Diversity? Justice? Let's talk about those values with humility and an appreciation that God's rainbow love shines through differing experiences – conflict is part of that. Let us also listen to other peoples' values – Jesus did, and it changed him!