



What My Faith Has Taught Me About Governance

SCRIPTURE:
Philippians 4:8-9

January 10, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:8-9

We have lived through an unprecedented week. Sometimes we want to come to worship to escape, to find sanctuary. I get that, I really do. I want that too at times. But to confess that Jesus is Lord, is to confess that the ways of Jesus shape every aspect of our lives. There is nothing in the world that lies outside the perspective of faith. Every moment of our lives matters to God, and every aspect of our communal life falls within the spiritual realm. As Presbyterians, there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular; the earth and all therein belongs to God, as the psalm says.

I'll tell you a time we got that wrong. It was December of 1861. I have told you about this before, do you remember? James Henley Thornwell, one of the brightest theological minds of the time, wrote an open letter explaining the creation of a new Presbyterian denomination. The Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America. It was later just referred to as the Southern Presbyterian Church. It became the denomination that taught me that Jesus is Lord.

But in December of 1861, the most significant moral issue of the time—or perhaps any time—was, of course, slavery. Thornwell's letter, which was

adopted by the new denomination, said, there is no inconsistency in being a follower of Jesus Christ and an owner of slaves. He said, the existence of slavery was a matter of the state and therefore separated from the concerns of the church. To quote Thornwell, he said whether slavery is practiced or not is “beyond the church's domain.” To enslaved people, the church said, God doesn't care.

The church was wrong. There is nothing “beyond the sphere” with respect to God. To confess that Jesus is Lord is to confess that Jesus is Lord of all of life.

So every week, but particularly on weeks when tragic or painful or dangerous things happen in the world, it is our calling to reflect on these matters from a perspective of the teachings of Jesus. I endeavor to do that with you each week, as I understand the text. As I do, I may not be right in how I see things; I know that. I know almost always that some of you may see things differently; I respect that. I can't be sure I am right, but I'll be honest with you. I am seeking to do so again today.

On Wednesday, the workings of our democracy were attacked both by citizens as well as by political leaders. People lost their lives. The building that is the center of our common life was desecrated. Urged by the President to “stop the steal,” democracy itself was attacked.

I was shaken by what I witnessed, and I am sure you were as well. I have become increasingly aware that America is not a given. She should not be treated casually. It's a lot easier to tear something down than it is to build something up. To build something requires character. This is a moment when our faith has something very important to teach us.

I've been a Presbyterian all of my life. If someone tells you that they are Presbyterian, you don't necessarily know what they believe. To claim to be Presbyterian is not first a statement about doctrine. If someone says, I'm Presbyterian, what you know about them is the values they hold regarding how a community makes decisions. To be Presbyterian is to recognize certain values that are needed for good governance. I want to share what I think our faith teaches us about good governance, at least as I understand it.

As Presbyterians, we believe that decisions are best made in groups. People make fun of us as the church held together by committees because there are clearly more efficient ways to govern a community. Catholics, Episcopalians and to a lesser degree, Methodists, are more efficient than us because they give much more power to individuals, bishops, and even popes.

But Presbyterians are suspicious of any one person having too much power. That's because we believe that everyone is sinful. Even the best person, even the most righteous person will do bad things. Sometimes out of selfish intent, absolutely. But even more so out of a blindness, a failing to see the needs of the neighbor, the value of the other. And when a person has power, the consequences of their sin are often borne by those with less power. But if decisions about the common good are not made by one person but by groups, then there is a check on the consequences of my sin. When decisions are made in groups, then my view has to encounter other views, and when I either fail to see my sin or ignore it, others might see it and hold it in check. As a result, the common good is better served. The group is a check on human sin.

Now, just because a group makes a decision doesn't mean groups can't make bad decisions. An entire Presbyterian denomination determined that slavery was all right with God. But we know that groups more consistently take a broader perspective than I might on my own. I need the wisdom of others.

But that's not all. A second value of good governance is honesty. Communities are not sustain-

able apart from truth. This week citizens stormed the Capitol in an effort to disrupt Congress's job to record the electoral vote. They all, no doubt, have social media feeds filled with conspiracy theories. They follow QAnon or listen to Alex Jones or Rush Limbaugh. They read Epoch Times or other such propagandizing platforms. And then the President spins his web of falsehood after falsehood after falsehood. Even as citizens were storming the Capitol, he claimed that he won the election in a landslide and the election was stolen. This is simply not true.

Even after this brazen attack on Wednesday, Senators and Congresspersons rose up to claim widespread election fraud. They are inviting a distrust in democracy. And their claims are unsubstantiated and dangerous. Even before the danger that erupted Wednesday, election workers, many of them having voted for the President, informed us all that they were receiving threats to their safety. How many courts have to say there is no evidence of fraud?

To attack truth is dangerous because without some recognized truth, communities cannot hold. It is hard to build a community, but it is easy to tear it apart; and dishonesty is a tool of destruction. There is a vast array of voices in our nation who create, out of whole cloth, narratives that have no basis in truth. They claim the earth is flat, or that Sandy Hook never happened, or the "deep state" exists to run a pornography ring, or that the election was stolen.

It is incumbent upon us, as citizens, to seek the truth, to honor facts, to live in the real world, not a world of fiction. America is a great nation, but America is not a given. Without truth, no democracy stands.

Our Presbyterian faith teaches us to be suspicious of individual power, to be relentless in the search for truth. Our church also teaches us the importance of our own voice. In 1788, the church adopted this principle in our Book of Order: God alone is Lord of the conscience. That means to us that you and you alone stand before God. You are responsible for your own wisdom and your own faith. The Session can't tell you what to think. The preacher

can't tell you what to think. There is no intermediary between you and God. You do not bow before anyone else, just God. This is one reason you will often hear me say, "If I understand the text." I am saying to you and to me, "This is how I see it, but I may have it wrong." So, what do you see? God alone is Lord of your conscience.

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and that means you should speak the truth you know. But there is a partner value with this, and it is: we respect majority rule. I don't have to agree with the majority, but in a spirit of good governance, I will submit to majority rule. I may strenuously object to the wisdom presented by the majority, and I can work to change the wisdom of the majority, but I won't overthrow it.

What we saw this week, both in the mob as well as from the voices of power, was a practice of governance devoid of these values. It's hurting us. And here is where we are all culpable. It is common to speak of any government in cynical terms. It is common to speak as if government is the problem, as if we would be better off with no government at all. Government is not the problem. No community, not this church, not this city, not your school, not your place of work, not this nation... no community is sustainable apart from governance. The question is, what are the values that shape our governance?

I've been Presbyterian all of my life. The Presbyterian Church, this stumbling and fragile and even sinful communion of saints, has been my primary teacher regarding the values that shape communal life.

These values were ignored this week, to the peril of the nation that we love. What we have witnessed in our recent history is the erosion of community when governance is practiced devoid of these values. I don't know if the values are rejected, or if there

is just some deep dementia that has washed these values from our communal life. They need to be rehearsed, like the apostle Paul teaches us: if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, set your mind on these things... hold fast to these things. The thing about these values is that they aren't a given. They are not built into any system. They have to be chosen. Values, character, morals... they are never the fruit of a governance process; they have to be chosen and brought to the governance process. Rather than becoming enslaved by our own cynicism, it is time for us to insist that values be chosen, no longer ignored.

Some will say, this is a civic matter and one that the preacher should not address. Thornwell said the same thing in 1861. I think differently; I think particularly now, we need to remember what our faith has taught us. Now is the time for us to bring our values to our communal life. As the apostle instructs, think about these things, these things that we have seen and known and heard... let us be focused on these things, and the God of peace will be known.

When groups, be they Sessions empowered by the vote of the congregation or government officials empowered by the vote of the people, when groups gather to make decisions, if they do so only to maintain power, only to increase power, only to exercise power, the common good always suffers. But when those entrusted with power for the common good recognize that they are servants of the public, when they not only endeavor to understand the truth but to stand under the truth, and when they speak their voice with conviction but also humility, the common good can be served.

And serving the common good is the purpose of government. At least that is what my Presbyterian faith has taught me.

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Tom Are, Jr., at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, Kansas, 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard, or watched on the church's website: www.villagepres.org/currentsermon-archives.html
