



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Are We Supposed to be Talking About This in Church?

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 4:16-30

May 15, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus went into the synagogue and he read inspiring words of the prophet Isaiah. Everyone loved it. But then he told them what he thought the scripture meant for them in their day. In other words, he preached, and they tried to kill him. Not every sermon is a good one, but killing the preacher, at least to me, seems a bit extreme.

Now, I have no doubt said things from time to time that caused your blood pressure to spike. It's not my intent; that gives me no joy. But the truth about our faith is that when it's honest, it speaks to the real issues in our real lives. And that's always risky. So, maybe you have thought about killing the preacher from time to time.

For this series, a good number of you asked that I preach about particular social issues. To reflect on them from the point of view of the faith. We do that from time to time. But others of you said, "No, don't do that. We don't come to church for that. Those conversations feel political and that's not why we are here. In worship, we should stick to the Bible."

This is an important conversation. What are we supposed to talk about in church? What does our faith require of us as Christian people regarding how we engage the larger world? What is the intersection between spiritual and moral life and politics?

Don't get nervous—it's okay. Let me first say this about you: We have had difficult conversations in this room about race, climate change, gun violence, about the inclusion of LGBTQ neighbors. And I have found you both gracious and generous; meaning, you have given me room to share what I understand to be wisdom from these old texts. And if I make my case with humility and, hopefully, some degree of clarity, even if it's not how

you see things, we can at least hear each other out. That happens less and less in our country. It doesn't happen in every church. I do not take that for granted with you.

Today I am not speaking to any particular social issue, but rather ask this: What are the boundaries for our conversations in church? Where does faith fall silent?

We are all political beings. I have my politics and you have yours. It's not the calling of the preacher to proclaim his or her personal politics and call it Christianity. Christian faith is too big for that. At the same time, none of us can let our political beliefs silence the word of faith, nor set boundaries of what can be addressed by faith, just because our faith may not align with our politics.

But this is where it gets complex. So let me try to take one more step. On the macro level, politics is the community's decisions of how we will live with one another. It is the policies which determine how we live together.

The Christian faith is a vision for how we will live with one another, too. It is not the same as politics, but they share the same conversation. Listen to Jesus:

"The spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, ...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." *God's promised day.*

I chose this text to reflect on the politics of Jesus, but I could have chosen most any moment in his ministry. I could have read from the prophets. I could have read from the ten commandments or the great commandment—all of it speaks to how we live with our neighbors.

Jesus gave his life to shape how we are with one another. The cornerstone of our faith is love

of God and love of neighbor. Jesus was concerned about the health of our communities. In this way, he was political. Not partisan. There are politicians who claim to carry the banner of Christianity, but they inevitably make our faith too small. Jesus was not partisan, but he was concerned about the justice and health of our communities. That's a moral concern.

I have told you how when I was in college, I got a job working as a choir director in a Baptist church in South Carolina. My friends there were very comfortable talking about the moment of their conversion. They would speak of Jesus coming into their hearts.

I have grown to understand conversion differently. I no longer believe I was converted once, but believe the walk of faith is filled with moments of growth and change. I am converted often. But more than that, to speak of Jesus coming into my heart is too restrictive. It's too private. Jesus doesn't just come into our hearts; he comes into our relationships. The love of God lives between us. It shows up in how we treat one another.

How we treat one another: That's the political concern for Jesus, and really the whole of scripture from Genesis to Revelation, is about how we are with one another. It's political. But it is not partisan. Faith and politics share a conversation but they play different roles.

So, there is a misstep if the voice in the pulpit crosses the line from conversations about the teachings of the faith regarding communal life and devolves into conversations about policy and partisanship. There is also a misstep, when our politics draw boundaries and inform our faith: You cannot speak to this or to that.

Here's an example. For the past generation, the church has thought and prayed and discerned the will of God about the inclusion of gay and lesbian persons. It has been a generation-long conversation (and sometimes fight) in the church. But that issue has also from time to time become political, becoming the policy focus of this or that party. When it does, the politics cannot render the voice of our faith mute. It is still a spiritual matter and must be talked about as such.

I have shared with you many times about a moment of conversion in my own life. I was in seminary and taking a class on American Church history. I was in the seminary library reading over documents from more than 150 years ago. I came across a theological justification for how Christians could own slaves. It was written in December of 1861 by a Presbyterian theologian named James Henley Thornwell. In 1861, slavery was the governing political issue. It was also a matter of overwhelming injustice. What should the church say about this? Thornwell said: The church shouldn't say anything. It wasn't ours to talk about. It was a political matter, and because the existence of slavery was a matter for the state, the church should remain quiet. He was wrong about that. Let me make sure I don't mislead. I'm not saying Thornwell was wrong because he believed slavery was okay, which he did. He was wrong about that, I believe.

But even more so, in calling the church to be silent in the face of injustice, he was removing God from the conversation about slavery. As a result, he made his politics his religion. Rather than Jesus Christ being Lord, his political worldview was his lord.

Now that's an extreme example, but Thornwell's argument still lingers. It's in the cultural air... "the church should talk about feelings and private morality, but not social morality. God's not interested in that." But our faith says otherwise and it always has. And your ministry here says otherwise. We say each week: We are living toward God's promised day.

We call it mission. Mission is when we spend mornings teaching inner-city children to read. Mission is when we collect food for the Food Pantry. Mission is when we support the work at Thelma's Kitchen. Mission is when we partner with Artists Helping the Homeless.

But mission is not just providing these services; our faith also calls us to ask, "Why are they in need? Why can't children read at grade level? Why are there Americans shooting Americans every week? Why are people unable to obtain food? Why is white nationalism so culturally embraced these

days? And why are the children of gay and lesbian parents taught that they should be ashamed of their parents?” All of these are political matters right now, but they are also spiritual issues to which the tenets of our faith speak. To ignore the questions of morality is not a faithful option.

We welcome our 2022 confirmation class today. They have done a great job with their work in confirmation and the Session was overjoyed to welcome them into the life of the church. They were asked, “Do you trust in Jesus Christ?” That’s the question that we ask. Trust shapes our choices. So, to trust in Jesus means his life shapes how we are with one another. That’s fruit of the spiritual life. And it is my prayer that by the time these confirmands have become the leaders of Village, that some of the struggles we face today will be distant history and we will have found a more just and kind and gracious way with one another.

I listened to an interview with a 19-year-old young woman named Asena. She is a Uyghur, part of an ethnic minority persecuted in China. Her life was difficult and her family lived in fear of oppression. Her father finagled a way to get the family to the United States. With teenage exuberance, she described her experience of stepping off the plane and walking into her first American airport:

“I stepped out of the airplane and saw a Star-

bucks. Starbucks looked amazing. Smelled amazing. It smelled expensive; it smelled fancy. I ordered coffee and I didn’t like coffee, but that coffee tastes so good, it tastes like upper-class. I feel like I’m rich now. I was so happy. I thought, I can go back to my friends and tell them that I had Starbucks and they would be jealous. But then I realized it was impossible. I might have Starbucks every day... but my friends can’t ever. I was not happy anymore... because whenever I have good things, the thought in my mind was...they should have this, too. Why can’t they have Starbucks?”¹

This young girl is Muslim, but I think she understands the politics of Jesus. Jesus had dreams for healthy communities. He had dreams for justice and kindness in communal life. He called for love of neighbor to shape every choice and he gave his life for that promised day. It is a day when there is an equity to human living. It’s not about having what other people have; it’s about everyone having what they need. Or as he said,

The blind see

The captives are set free

The oppressed are released...

It’s what we all want for everyone, I think. And if I understand the texts—all of the texts—if we are going to draw closer to that day, we will need to talk about it in church.

1 “Teenage Life After Genocide,” The Experiment podcast.