



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Patriotism Informed by Citizenship

SCRIPTURE:
Mark 12:28-34

July 3, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The scribe asked Jesus: What is the greatest commandment? What are we for? What is life about? Jesus said: Love. The thing about love is there always has to be someone to love. You can't do it by yourself.

In his book “Abundant Community,” Peter Block describes what he calls the erosion of citizenship in contemporary America. He describes citizenship this way, “The way to the good life is a path that we make by walking it with those who are around us... We, together, become the producers of a satisfying future.”¹ A satisfying future is claimed by walking together.

I read those words more than a decade ago and they rang true. Today one might wonder if citizenship, as Block defines it, is ground that can be recovered at all. Assuming that we were that way before, could we be that way again?

We are living in unsettling times. Not for all, but for the majority of Americans, the reversal of Roe, which had been called ‘settled law’ by the very justices who reversed it makes us wonder: What is settled? Conservative justices, through a judicial philosophy of originalism, read the Constitution akin to the way religious fundamentalists read the scriptures. Fundamentalism has always been too narrow a read to point to abundant life. And with Justice Thomas signaling what he hopes to overturn next, it is legitimate to wonder: Where are we going?

I told you last Sunday that I would say a word about this today. I shared much of my thinking in an eNote to you on Monday. Many of you have responded, sharing your thoughts, which I appreci-

ate. What you shared is a lot of uncertainty. There is a feeling among many, particularly women, that they are somehow lesser than they were before. As one woman said to me, “I am shaken.” The ruling claims to take power from the federal government and give it to the States, but the consequence, as my friend David Von Drehle says, is to take “power away from [women] and to give it to the government.”² It is rare when a right that the country had previously provided is taken away and it implies we can't be trusted—women can't be trusted.

I am no evangelist for abortion. It is not something that should be embraced casually. Bringing a child into the world is a miracle and one of the most amazing experiences we can know. But we also know that sometimes that is not the case.

Further complicating this matter for people of faith: Abortion is not something the scriptures speak to. There is no Biblical teaching on when a fertilized egg becomes a human being. You and I may have our thoughts about that and we should. We should think about it deeply. And those thoughts should be informed by our faith, but to claim we understand the mind of God on this matter is difficult. Yet, our tradition calls us to trust women, who bear the beauty and sometimes the burden of pregnancy—to trust them to know what is best for them and for their families. But because we can't claim to know the mind of God on this, we should also be gracious to those who have struggled and find themselves in a different place.

One of you wrote me this week and said, “I appreciate some of what you said, but I am not on the same page. Is there still room for me at Village?” Of course, there is. There is room for you with God,

1 John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc: San Francisco), 2010, p. 18.

2 David Von Drehle, “In Dobbs, These Untruths are Self-Evident” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2022.

so there is room at Village. We are not the church because we all agree. My faith and wisdom have great limits. That's true for us all. If you and I don't agree, well, you may be right and I may be wrong. If you and I do agree, don't celebrate; we may both be wrong. I make no claim to know God's will and way all the time. I can only be honest with you about what I see. A few have said, "Tom, that's not really your place to talk about this." I think it is. We are all struggling to discern the ways of God in this world and faith is always enriched when we are honest about real things.

But discernment is difficult in unsettling times. And I think the times are unsettled in part because of what Peter Block recognizes. There is an erosion of our civic spirit. We see it in the divided news narratives that surround every aspect of our lives. There is no way for me to offer a sermon or for you to have a conversation about anything that really matters without bumping up against one news narrative or another. We not only lack shared values; we don't share facts. Far too many 'reporters' begin with their conclusions and then cherry-pick truths or substitute falsehoods for truths. With the result being we have no shared civic narrative in our day. That reality is eroding the strength of our union. No community can hold together apart from truth. The willingness to embrace and propagate untruth is destroying us.

The most egregious expression of the weakening of this civic spirit is being rehearsed for us in the hearings of the Jan. 6 revolt. It has shaken us because to attack democracy in America, that should be foreign to us, shouldn't it? But it has made us all aware that democracy is not a given. The America we love should not be treated casually or this experiment in democracy could slip from our fingers. It is being tested today.

I share Peter Block's concern for the erosion of civic spirit because I'm Presbyterian. To say you are Presbyterian may or may not communicate your doctrine but it does communicate the values you hold for how decisions should be made—the values of good governance. And for us, to produce a satisfying future together. We don't do everything by committee because it's efficient. We do everything by committee because the good life is

built together. It is an expression of trust in one another. If there aren't committees in heaven, we won't know what to do with ourselves. This stumbling, fragile, and even sinful Presbyterian Church has been my primary teacher regarding the values that shape communal life. That includes a confidence that the good life is shaped together and that requires truth and trust.

I can't know the mind of the scribe who came to Jesus, but I wonder if he is seeking clarity because he, too, felt life was a bit unsettled. "Which is the greatest commandment?" he asked. What are we for? What is the purpose of this life?

Jesus says: Love God with all that you are and your neighbor as yourself. In this moment, Jesus engages in the only conversation in the entire gospel about love. Does that surprise you? It's the only time that love is discussed in Mark's gospel. There are demonstrations of love from beginning to end. He heals the sick. He raises the dead. He speaks words of mercy and he calms every kind of storm. All as acts of love. But here is the only time love of God and love of neighbor is discussed and it is stated as the purpose of our lives.

I suppose that is the first instruction to us. In Christian faith, love is not a declaration of our feelings. Well, of course, love is something that we feel. But the commandment does not speak to how we should feel about one another. It speaks to how we treat one another. Love is something that we do. It is the choice we make to live for the good of the neighbor. I think citizenship is a form of love of neighbor or, at least for people of faith, it should be.

Every December, Christians celebrate Christmas. I know it's hard to think about candlelight and carols on the weekend of fireworks, but bear with me for a moment. In the incarnation, the heart of God chose to enter human history—to live in this world. Why did God do that? To state the truth of Christmas simply: God wanted to be in this world because God loves this place. This is the world of God's creating and the world of God's redeeming. God loves this world. And as people of faith, we endeavor to love what God loves.

And if we love what God loves, then I think we too are called to love our place, to love our country.

Traditional language for that love is patriotism. It has often been a good word. But I must confess in the cultural climate of recent times, what it means to be patriotic needs reflection.

Just one example: Those who stormed the Capitol Building on Jan. 6 would all identify themselves as patriots. Committed to “stop the steal” as they were told, they called for the Vice President to be hanged. People were killed. The building that is the center of our common life was desecrated. They attacked democracy. And they professed to do this because they are patriots. But it is a patriotism that diminishes and belittles the value of their neighbors.

I think we need fewer patriots and more citizens. We need people devoted to building the good life together. It’s the harder choice. Embracing cynicism and conspiracy is much easier.

But too much of our common life is defined by a patriotism that traffics in shaming others, in dismissing others, in lying to others and even in attacking our very democracy. These are lazy forms of patriotism.

We can choose a better way. It is harder, but it is the way to build what Block calls a satisfying future. So, in unsettling times, I urge you to lean on this teaching of our faith. It will urge us not simply to be patriots, but to be patriots informed by citizenship.

Peter Block says our civic spirit is eroding and wonders if it can be reclaimed. I think it can. But things that really matter take time. And hope. And as Jesus taught us: A willingness to love our neighbors. So, love what God loves and love this country, but let our patriotism be informed by citizenship.

I believe when life is unsettled, this is the way forward. This is the way to find a satisfying future. When Jesus was asked, “What are we for?” He said: Love God and one another and build life together. Love is something we do. It involves trust and it involves truth and it does not belittle or shame.

In unsettling times, this remains our way forward. It’s not fast. It’s not easy, but it is the greatest gift we can offer our neighbors and our nation.