

## ***Talking in Church***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

July 21, 2024

Text: Matthew 7:12-20

Talking in church. Now there's a concept we take for granted. Of course we talk in church. We actually talk before church as people are arriving. We talk during church in the responsive readings, in prayers and songs, sometimes even as part of the morning message. And we certainly talk after church, the chattering beginning during the passing of the peace and continuing on into Fellowship Hall or out into the parking lot. Talking in church is a part of who we are as a church. It is the most important way we form a community of God's Beloved people here. It is the way we stay connected, the way we share our sorrows, our joys and our dreams of the future. In short, talking in church is an absolute must. This morning, though, I am hopeful we can give some additional thought to what we talk about in church and why we do it. I want us to consider that sometimes when we talk in church we are doing one of the most important things any Christian church can and should be doing – witnessing to ourselves and our community what it is we believe. In other words, sometimes talking in church is an essential piece of our responsibility as followers of the Risen Christ to name the sins we see as sin, to witness to problems being caused for everyone when one small group thinks it holds the only answers for everyone everywhere in this country. Sometimes talking in church means talking about politics. And guess what? That's okay. In fact, I would argue that at this fraught time in our beloved country, talking about topics some see as political is absolutely essential. Let me explain.

The words of Jesus in today's text from the Sermon on the Mount offer us a guide for this conversation. This beautiful summary of Jesus' teachings takes up no less than three chapters in Matthew's Gospel, today's text coming almost at the end. This text is where Jesus starts to sum up all his previous lessons and teachings. In verse 7 we find the one sentence encapsulating everything else he has been saying up to this point: "In

everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” This is the Golden Rule which so many of us learned from our parents and grandparents and, maybe even our Sunday School teachers. And Jesus is, unsurprisingly, absolutely right. In this simple phrase “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you” is the summary of the primary teaching of all the Old Testament pages and pages of laws and rules and proclamations we find in all the stories of Moses and Noah and Joseph and Abraham as well as all the prophets, major and minor. Be kind. Be just. Be loving. Don’t be selfish. Don’t put yourself first. In these actions your love of God is revealed. Of course the other teaching is to love God, with all that you are and all that you have. This too is the law and the prophets.

In Matthew’s summary of this memorable day when Jesus was speaking on a hill, Jesus doesn’t stop there. He continues on to explain that this is not at all easy to do. In fact it’s quite difficult. That’s what he means by the image of entering by the narrow gate. Not a lot of people will be successful at living this teaching into life each day because it is really difficult to do. Why? Because we are all flawed human beings. We get angry at each other. We get frustrated with each other and sometimes we get so fed up we just lash out at other people. Giving in to these feelings is the easy road Jesus describes as the road many people end up taking because not giving in to our anger, and our fear of others who think differently than we do is just too hard. It’s much easier to just be angry. Being more difficult is no excuse, Jesus says. Stay focused on that narrow gate. But we don’t, do we. It’s just too hard when there is so much to be frightened about in this moment in history through which we are living. It’s just too easy to give into the fear, hate and division some others seem to thrive on.

As we read on in Matthew’s gospel, it almost seems like Jesus anticipated the times we are living in now! “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” Yikes!

Feels like false prophets are everywhere these days! On the news, in the newspapers, on social media for sure. False prophets howling like wolves behind their soft and fuzzy sheep masks. And the really confusing thing is that in our super divisive reality in the USA these days, both sides of this political debate see the other side as the howling wolves hiding behind fuzzy sheep. Or are they fuzzy sheep who have decided they like the howling wolves better anyway so what's the problem with howling wolves? Yikes! That is a scary reality folks! It really is! And it's so important to remember that both sides of the political divide in this country are scared because they see the folks who think, and believe, and look, and behave differently from them as the real howling wolves.

So, dear ones, what are we to do? Luckily, Jesus has some advice for us on this. He reminds us that it is possible to recognize the false prophets when you know what to look for. And, what you look for is the fruits of their efforts. Are they bearing good fruit or bad fruit? Still not clear? Okay, go back to verse 7 where we started to see how to begin figuring this piece out: "in everything do to others as you would have them do to you." The howling wolf says immigrants are bad – evil and dirty – and they deserve to be kicked out of this country. Hmmm. Is that what I would want to happen to me? Is that what did happen to my ancestors when they arrived here decades or centuries ago? The howling wolf says women aren't capable of making the right decisions for their own health care and their own bodies, and that folks of all ages who finally have the courage to say that they do not feel right in their own bodies don't know what they are talking about. Where is doing to and for others as you would have done for you and your loved ones in that calculus? Don't take too much time looking because it's not there. It's not there because these howling wolves are convinced that they are correct, and at the same time, that everyone else is completely wrong about all these issues. They know they are right because God told them so. Really? Then why did God send Jesus to teach something else entirely different?

These questions, dear ones, are real questions and they have been around for centuries. They compromise what is called the long argument, a topic Diana Butler Bass, the leading historian of Christianity in the United States, wrote about in a provocative blog post this past week. This argument has been going on, she argues, for millennia and it is coming to a head right now, right here, in our country in the year 2024. She also observes that this coincides with a development in the 1980's in mainline Christianity when it decided that talking about politics in church was the primary reason for the slow decline in mainline churches, like ours. So, since then, mainline churches, like ours, have “either embraced [the] politics-causes-decline thesis or continued in a familiar pattern of faith and politics that muted the ‘faith’ part. One response led to quietism and the other toward denial. Both responses proved disastrous.”<sup>1</sup> This then led, she argues, to the tacit decision to stop talking about politics in church since politics caused the decline in the church. Except it didn't. Other social and demographic factors did.<sup>2</sup> Even more importantly, just as the mainline churches, like ours, stopped talking about politics in churches, the evangelicals were talking about politics all the time. “All the time. Everywhere. In sermons, at political conventions, at church gatherings. ... And evangelical churches were growing like topsy.”<sup>3</sup> A coincidence? Not hardly. This is proof of why conversations about politics must happen in churches because it is part of our tradition to do so, Bass explains. She notes, “ultimately, that's how Christianity defines politics – a long argument about the life of God and civic life, about the relationship between *Theos* and *polis*. ... From a theological perspective, politics is the argument about the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 4

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 4

nature of community, who counts in community, [and who doesn't] and our moral responsibility for community.”<sup>4</sup>

What is essential for mainline churches today, Bass posits, is to intentionally reclaim the long argument about how God's people live in community together despite their many differences as a central one for the survival of the church, and our country. She is saying we must reclaim the willingness to engage in this political conversation about whether we are going to enter God's kingdom through the narrow gate of prayerful and thoughtful reflection on just who is the "other" we are to treat as ourselves. Or through the wide gate that the howling wolves proclaim as the only gate because "only their way is the right way, the right view, the right vote."<sup>5</sup> Bass reminds us that young evangelicals were from childhood "taught that there was only one way. Jesus' way. The Bible's way. The Pastor's way. And, eventually, Donald Trump's way." <sup>6</sup> Only one way to believe in God, to practice faith, to live life. Only one. Theirs. And that dear ones, is terrifying. You have only to skim the summaries of what took place at last week's RNC Convention to see that. You have only to skim through Project 2025 to know what their plans are for all of us if they are successful in this election cycle. That, dear ones, is terrifying. And, that is why we must reclaim talking about politics in church, this church. We cannot be hesitant or afraid to address these topics head on. We cannot afford NOT to talk in church about such vitally important matters which will impact ourselves and our children and grandchildren for generations.

Let me be clear, though. Talking about political issues in church does not mean telling anyone how to vote although I will be reminding everyone TO vote. It does not mean every sermon will sound like a political opinion piece. Heavens no! It means that I will be talking about how it is that we

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 6

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

understand our own practice of the Christian faith and how that belief and practice is different from our conservative, evangelical Christian kindred. I will be talking about how vital it is that we engage in the long argument about the relationship between faith and politics.

Dear ones, as we enter into what is proving to be the most fraught, the most frightening and the most consequential Presidential election of any of our lifetimes, I cannot remain silent and I hope that we as a congregation are open to not remaining silent together. What that means, we'll figure out along the way. One last glimmer of hope I will share from Diana Butler Bass' article is this: Those young evangelicals who were indoctrinated from birth to this "our way is the right way and the only way to Jesus" thinking? There is strong evidence that many of them are leaving the church and the indoctrination it forced upon them. They are leaving that way of thinking about God and Jesus and they are leaving now. Why? Because they have had the courage to move beyond what has been poured into their heads and hearts from birth and think about what they personally experience from Jesus and his teachings. They have learned how to recognize their own false prophets when they see them. And they have found the courage to name what they have learned so that others outside that very closed and insular world of conservative evangelical Christianity, that has morphed into Christian Nationalism, will see it for what it is.

May Jesus bless us with the strength and courage to dare to talk more in church about our communities and how they function together for the good of all citizens, not just a few. May God guide us forward in this time so fraught with peril and fear as we dare to talk about the things that truly matter in church, even when some might see that as politics. May we use God's gift of conversation with each other as one way of exploring just what it means to love the other as much as we love ourselves and to love God through doing so. Amen.