

A Theology for Democracy
Colossians 1:16-20
July 3, 2022
North Decatur Presbyterian Church
David Lewicki, preaching

For in Christ all things are created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... Christ is before all things, and in Christ all things hold together.¹⁸ ... and through Christ God reconciles all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

My 14 year-old son has been saying something, of late, and its bothering me. He keeps saying, “we have to get religion out of politics.”

I get where he’s coming from. We were listening to the radio in the car on the afternoon of the Dobbs decision and we heard an interview with the former Gov. of Mississippi, a Christian, who was jubilant at the verdict. The interviewer asked the former governor what he would say to women who now faced unwanted pregnancies with few choices, and he said, “I would say first you need to kneel and pray to God... and ... have him open your eyes and come into your heart and realize this is your child. And you're about to take all that away for your convenience.”

Maybe I was in a bad mood that day, but it was one of the ugliest lines I have heard a politician speak. The question was “what do you say to a woman who is in a hard, hard situation?” He showed no sympathy. No attempt to see the world through another’s eyes. His view—when it came to abortion did not have room for dissenting voices. God has told him what is right, so others must be wrong. This is not the politics of compromise. It is not the politics of mutual forbearance. This is the politics of *theocracy*—rule by religion. His solution for unwanted pregnancy was unwanted religious conversion.

I understand why my son says he wants religion out of politics.

On this 4th of July weekend, as we prepare to celebrate the 246th birthday of the world’s oldest continuing democracy, we find ourselves in a strange moment. A 50 year-old conservative white evangelical political project has accumulated enough power and bent the norms and the rules of politics enough to allow this small minority to make the laws for our whole nation. This most recent Supreme Court term brought us a taste of their agenda, which includes: Christian prayer in public schools; taxpayer dollars for Christian schools that teach our queer kids that they’re evil; and of course, men who enjoy more government protection for their firearms than women have for their reproductive organs.

The strangeness of this moment is that that it was all made possible by white evangelical Christians’ alliance with a most unlikely former president. White evangelical Christians were so hungry for power that they were willing to drop all coherent theological convictions, in order to grab the president’s coattails with both hands.

While it was always clear that the former president had a caustic style and was eager to pit Americans against one another, what became clear over time is that the former president loathed the *rule of law itself*—the sacred agreement that has held our society together. He loathed democracy. He could not abide by the idea that it is the people who rule this land, not him. The former President orchestrated an armed coup against our government when he failed to win re-election. And white evangelical Christians kept on supporting him.

This moment, then, is a vexing convergence of theocracy—government by God—aligning with autocracy—rule by one person who seeks unlimited power.

It is a scary moment for America. It is yet another test for our democracy. We have faced tests before. Lincoln referred to the greatest of all tests at Gettysburg, when he said: *Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all [people] are created equal can long endure.*” We know our nation did endure. Only barely. And not without tragic costs. For though democracy endured, it did so at the expense—yet again—of Black and Brown Americans, who were condemned by white America to another 100 years of exclusion from life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We are fooling ourselves if we take this current threat to democracy too lightly. I know we are polite Presbyterians. We want to believe people can just get along—I believe that. But if you listen to the conversations happening far away from Decatur, and if you note the willingness of many white Christian Americans buy in to a fantasy of their own victimhood and embrace that fantasy with revolutionary fervor, and if you observe how important it is for them to arm themselves against their so-called “oppressors,” it is not hard to imagine another civil war in our future.

What I want to ask today is *what we should be doing at this moment as a church of Jesus Christ?* At our session retreat in April, as we were talking about what our church is called to be and do in this moment, one of your wise elders observed, “we have been a church of dreamers (and I thought he was about to make a complement) ... *but the world is now on fire.*” What are we prepared to do about it?

I had a conversation a few weeks ago with another member of the church who is asking similar questions about who we are as a church in this moment. This person has deep relationships with folks who are politically and theologically further right. She said some things that I want to share with you. She said, “when our world and our institutions are breaking apart, I want the church to remind me that God holds all things together.” She was channeling this vision of the cosmic Christ from the letter to the Colossians. Whether we can see it or not, we have to believe God is working to bind us together as one.

Shouldn't we, then, as a congregation, do our very best to make space for all of God's people under this roof? Maybe I need to be quiet about politics, and let my convictions as a citizen not affect the proclamation from this pulpit. What if the prophetic call of this moment were not to join the civil war, not to take sides, but to be a literal space where reconciliation is our highest aim?

Rev. Mary Anona Stoops sent me an essay this week about the unlikely friendship between an Arkansas congressman who was for many years the mouthpiece of the NRA in Congress and a CDC researcher whose life's work was gun violence research, who tried for years to get congress to pay attention to the data about gun violence as they set policy. There's a moment in the story, when the two men are fresh off a heated congressional hearing, and the congressman does something extraordinary: he invites the researcher into his office. The researcher pauses—should he meet this man—his *enemy*—face-to-face? He goes into the congressman's office. That meeting is the beginning of a friendship between the two men that last for decades and ends only when the researcher offers the eulogy at the congressman's funeral.

The deep truth this story tells—and the reason we need to hear stories like this at this moment—is that there is always more that we human beings share in common than divides us. We all love our children and want their future to be better than the present. We all want to enjoy peace, prosperity, safety, and freedom. But to find out how much we share in common, someone has to be willing to take a risk to invite the enemy in; we have to listen to one another and talk with one another and make space for one another. We have to risk letting our mind be changed. This is not naïve, “can't we all get along” stuff. This is a theological conviction: every human being is Beloved in God's sight. And even when those Beloveds piss us off, we are to love them *even more* because Jesus said so and he modeled it by inviting tax collectors (the “right”) and Zealots (the “left”) into his inner circle.

At the same time that we commit to the work of making courageous connections others who do not think as we do, I still hope and expect that you will not sit idly by while one small group of white Christian Americans tries to overthrow democracy, revoke constitutional and voting rights, and steel itself for what they believe will be an armed holy war. Don't sit on the sidelines. Democracy itself is at stake.

Democracy, I want you to remember, is a theological project. Democracy is an expression of something that we Christians hold dear: it is an expression of Beloved Community.

Remember how democracy came to be in the first place? It came through religion. Protestantism emerged because people were sick of unaccountable leaders. Martin Luther and John Calvin and so many others risked their lives to reform the church because the church was modeling bad theology about how to make decisions.

The reformers understood that God's will is less likely to emerge through one person in a pointy hat or a red tie than through *the will of all the people*. The Reformation moved power from the hands of a few into the hands of the many. This is why we organize our church the way we do and elect our leaders. Because our God is a grassroots God, not a top-down God; God's will is discerned through the will of the people. Democracy—trusting the will of the people—is a deeply theological project.

A second affirmation about the spiritual roots of democracy follows from the first. Democracy is the system of government that best protects us from the sin of thinking we always know the right answer. Democracy—because it draws a wide circle around the “we” in “we the people,”

keeps us in conversation with each other. If it were up to us, we would draw the circle of “we” more narrowly. But that’s theologically naïve—even ruinous. Read the New Testament, where the Spirit of God is always drawing the circle wide in surprising ways. God is always locating revelation outside of where we think it should be. The pregnancy of Mary. The Syrophenecian woman’s testimony. The conversion of Saul. The Ethiopian eunuch. The revelation to Peter, who, God bless him, finally seems to tune in to what God is up to and declares, “God shows no partiality among human beings.” The New Testament is one long meditation on God’s crazy love for *all* people. If we think for a minute that we’ve got a handle on God, that we know God’s will once and for all, it’s a sign we’ve surely lost our way—politically and theologically. The writer Anne Lamott put it succinctly when she said, “you can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when God hates all the same people you do.”

We must draw the circle wide. We must have the widest possible understanding of who “we” are. God—if the Bible is to be trusted—constantly surprises us by revealing God’s will in the people we want to draw out of our circle. That wide circle is democracy. Democracy is big, it’s diverse, it’s inclusive, it’s messy, it’s contentious, but it is also faithful and sometimes even holy.

We do not need to get religion out of politics. Good theology builds strong democracies, and strong democracies nurture good theology. We who follow Jesus are called to love each other. Politics is yet one more place in life where we’re called to obey the commandment to love. Politics is this space we share with others, where we work out our convictions about who human beings are and what we are here for.

In the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote one of the great theological affirmations in recorded history, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

That’s a theological declaration. The irony, you surely know, is that Thomas Jefferson didn’t believe it. But other came along after him who did. Frederick Douglass believed it. And Susan B. Anthony believed. And so many other Christians have worked and prayed and organized and worshiped in ways that have drawn the circle of democracy wider, to include all of us under the great umbrella of “we the people.” I hope that we, as a congregation, will choose to stand in that long line of those who have lived in the hope that America will, one day, in the words of Dr. King, “rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed.”

We let the poet Langston Hughes have the final word:

*O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every [one] is free.*