

A Theology for Democracy

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

I take this quote by the Russian dissident author Solzhenitsyn literally. For me, it's akin to gospel. It is another way of saying what Jesus told us, which is “love your enemies.” We love our enemies because God has made a world in which they are not separable from us. We belong to one another. If we see evil in them, we know that our common humanity means we are not immune to that evil. For the sake of compassion, for the sake of our own wholeness, we can never destroy our enemy. We love the person who has been overwhelmed by evil. We must love our enemies until one--or both--of us are transformed so that we cannot be enemies anymore.

I share this quote with you this morning because I'm going to talk about democracy. Democracy is a political system. But it is also a spiritual practice. Democracy is, among other things, a way for a Christian to love her enemy.

We need to talk about democracy today. We stand at the beginning of another presidential election year and, let's be honest, we're anxious as hell. Anti-democratic sentiments in America, which have always been with us, are rising. Rather than stew all year in a pot of anxiety, I want to encourage all of you to be engaged in democracy this year. Be engaged in the democratic process. Because involvement in democracy is not only consistent with your Christian faith--it may even be required by it.

We all know there's a strain in Christianity that says faith and politics should not mix. That strain, especially here in the South, was promoted by apologists for slavery, who claimed that the church only concerns itself with heaven and matters of our eternal salvation and that the religion of Jesus has little to do with “worldly” matters like economics or politics or whether it was OK to own another human being. That kind of thinking is wrong.

Christianity is a thoroughly political religion. We believe that we are created by God to be social beings. We are created to be in Communion with one another--and because each of us is frail and limited in our gifts, we need each other and rely on each other. Politics is how we work out how to create community and the common good together; it's inherent to the way God makes us. When Jesus appears in the world, he says, “friends, there are principles and values for the kinds of community we are called to create. Jesus mockingly calls his community, “the Empire of God,” because he is explicitly contrasting it to the political values of the Roman empire.

Freedom, not domination, peace, not violence, sharing wealth, not hoarding it, compassion, not dehumanization.

The way of Jesus is political in that it tells us how we are to “see” other people. It tells us what legitimate power is and how power should be used. Perhaps most of all, Christianity helps us order what we love. Christianity is political. If someone tells you it’s not, it’s probably because they’re afraid of losing the power they have if the world were re-ordered according to the love of Jesus.

If Christianity is political, I also want to say to you this morning that democracy is the most profoundly spiritual form of government our world has seen. The word democracy comes from Greece. *Demos* means “people” and *kratia* means “rule.” Rule by the people. It emerged as an alternative to aristocracy--rule by an elite (although, let’s be honest--most democracies, including ours, feel like aristocracies). Democracy disappeared from Europe sometime around 500CE. When it rose again as a political system, its rise was parallel to a rise in similar impulses within the church.

From the 1400s through the 1800s, Europe saw uprisings against both monarchies and centralized church leadership. The criticisms of kings and popes were that their power was illegitimate and that it was unaccountable. They were illegitimate because it made no sense that one arbitrary family got to rule over every other one. And when these arbitrary rulers abused their power or were found incompetent, there was no way to remove them. What these revolutionaries and reformers were doing was deeply Scriptural. In 1 Samuel 8, God’s people clamor for a king because we think having a king will make us powerful. God basically says “you don’t want a king... it never ends will.” God was right. It took us a few thousand years to learn.

Revolutions roiled in the church and in the state. The revolution in the church came to be known as the Protestant Reformation. We Presbyterians are descended from this rebellion. Our Presbyterian ancestors weren’t just rejecting the authority of the pope. They were also saying something about the way God moves in the world. “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” The Holy Spirit works within each and every one of you. Everyone has a relationship with God by the Spirit. The Spirit is *democratic* by nature--She doesn’t reveal herself to people with the best credentials or the right family connections. Sometimes God will show something to only one of us. So there has to be a system of governance--a polity--that hears the voice of God in every person. We elect our elders; they are bound to abide by a written constitution--one that we wrote for ourselves and are constantly amending. Presbyterians organized our churches so that we could hear one another. In our collective discernment, the will of God emerges.

You see how similar our vision for church is the to the vision of those who founded this nation. The colonists told the king to get lost and in place of the monarchy, they created a constitutional democracy. A government of, by, and for the people, in which our leaders are elected by the people, and the will of the majority prevails. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting America in the 1830s, observed that American religious practice and the practice of democracy were deeply connected. Religion moderated our greed, gave us an appreciation for sacrifice and

the common good, gave us a healthy respect for sin and the impulse to dominate, and gave us a space to practice the speaking and listening and corporate discernment that are essential to democracy. Participatory religion and democracy, de Tocqueville said, were fast friends.

I want to pause here. I don't want to pretend for a minute that American democracy has ever been perfect, or even good. We have never been a full democracy. We excluded women from democracy until 1920. We kept Black people from democracy until the 1960s. White, wealthy men have worked as hard as we could to exclude others from the democratic process. What has always been so moving to me, is to see that the greatest reform movements in our country have been about expanding democracy--letting democracy move in the direction of its theological foundations--the Holy Spirit is revealed in every human being, and every human being deserves to have his voice heard and her vote counted. In his 1963 speech from the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. King said:

We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now.... Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.

It is always the right time for systems--whether in church or politics--to facilitate, not hinder, the movement of the Spirit toward inclusion, toward justice, and toward the common good.

Democracy--in the church and in the world--is a theological good. Every person is an image-bearer of the Divine. To have a properly-ordered society, every person must have a hand in shaping our values through participation in the democratic process. Only then will we see what the will of the majority truly is. But the value of democratic process goes even deeper than that. Our democracy's most profoundly theological accomplishment was the creation in 1791 of a Bill of Rights that protects the rights of the minority against the abuses of the majority. Even though I might believe that your ideas are wrong, your policies are misguided and will do real harm and even if I believe you have been taken in by some kind of evil... I insist on protecting your rights. You always get to vote, you always get to speak, you always get to organize. The protection of rights is literally how we love our enemies.

Democracy is a spiritual practice. Instead of being anxious, be engaged:

- Vote.
- Register other people to vote. 1/3 eligible Americans did not vote in 2020. Mostly because they weren't registered. Young people under 30 and people of color were the most under-represented.
- Volunteer to be a poll worker; protect the integrity of the voting process.
- Get to know your legislators. These people don't rule over you--they work for you! Contact them about the issues you care about. Start with your county or city commissioners. Contact your state representatives. Write them personal notes, call their office. Get your neighbors to do the same.
- Presbyterians for a Better Georgia is an organization dedicated to this kind of faithful engagement in democratic process. Show up and be a part of PBG's work.

- If you have an elected official you like, volunteer for their campaign. Give money to them.
- Don't just advocate for your candidate. Help make our whole democracy better, stronger, and fuller. Join the folks organizing to end gerrymandering, or the folks who are working to create sensible campaign finance laws.

It's easy to become cynical about democracy. It's overwhelmed by dark money and corporate greed. Our democracy has plenty of anti-democratic features--the electoral college system and gerrymandered districts that dilute individual voters' power.

Democracy, just like church, is not perfect and it's not finished. It's an experiment. It's a practice. It's a process. Democracy, as flawed as it is, is a hard-won way for you and me to organize our common life and pursue the common good. It affirms the image of God in every person, it sees the Holy Spirit within every human conscience; it lets us love our enemies by ensuring their basic rights, even as we work to create a majority whose will renders our political enemies ineffectual.

You have a choice at the cusp of 2024. You can resign yourself to the politics of dehumanization, annihilation of the enemy, authoritarianism, and zero-sum-game thinking.

Or, you can be faithful. We who follow Jesus believe that through Christ, God is reconciling *all* things. In Christ, all things--all people--hold together. Because of Christ, we don't destroy our enemies--to do so would be to destroy ourselves. We love our enemies. And democracy is the best way we've got in this moment of loving each other into wholeness.

Benediction:

"Now there is a reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies."

Martin Luther King Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," from [A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)