

Identity Politics and the Gospel 5/26/19

Acts 6:1-7; Luke 10:25-37; Gal. 3:20; Phil. 2:14

This is Memorial Day Weekend, a time when we honor and give thanks for those who died in service to our country. I hope you will take time to give thanks for them as you gather around the barby for picnics and fun this weekend. I think it's also an appropriate time to reflect on our nation, especially to evaluate how we're doing in living up to the ideals for which so many have valiantly fought. Since New Testament times the church has often taken a role in calling governments to account for justice, compassion, truth and other qualities. It did so during the time of St. Augustine, during the Reformation, the Civil War, in Germany during the 1930's, and during the fight for civil rights in our country. This morning's sermon is in line with that tradition, although some of you may prefer I go back to our series on John's gospel!

Let's jump right in! I am deeply concerned about the dominance of so-called "Identity Politics" in our country today. To quote Derek Rishmawy in a recent *Christianity Today* article, "We live in a time of take-no-prisoners tribal combat, where our (political) enemies are not simply wrong but evil and need to be destroyed. Our social media mobs are not satisfied with highlighting problems but rush to play judge, jury, and social executioner in a matter of hours." (end quote) Behind this breakdown of civil discourse

lies “Identity Politics,” which Wikipedia defines as, “the tendency of people sharing a particular racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity to form exclusive political alliances...promoting their particular interests without regard for the interests of a larger political group.” (end quote)

Identity politics works because it preys on people’s insecurities and fears. It assumes that no one else can possibly understand what it is to be poor or black or female or LGBT or under-employed or culturally conservative or even Christian! Because we believe that no one else will care about or advocate for our particular group or tribe, power politics is all that matters. So those elected to power, even by slim margins, have no need to look out for anyone but those in their own aggrieved group. As a consequence, legislative bodies struggle mightily to build the trust and coalitions necessary to get anything done for the common good. So we’re stuck and we’re angry about it.

Fortunately, Christianity has something to contribute to this dilemma based on biblical teaching and our own experience. We can begin with Jesus in this story from Luke 10.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”²⁷ He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength,

*and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”*²⁸ *And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”* (Luke 10:25-28)

Here, Jesus cuts to the heart of the matter. We are to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. And that includes Democrats and Republicans and Trumpites and Socialists. This is consistent with the foundational teaching of the Bible all the way back in Genesis 1 where we're told that we were created in the very image of God. That's why each person has great value and is loved by God. And that's why we must love our neighbors; they are creatures made God's image. And that image is in there, no matter how wrong we think they are!

You may remember that after Jesus affirmed the two great commandments, the lawyer who asked the question asked another one—“And who is my neighbor?” in order to justify himself. “Surely, we're not required to love every kind of neighbor, are we?” he implied. In answer, Jesus tells a story in which the hero is not part of their identity group (Jewish religious leaders), but instead is a Samaritan, a rival religious and ethnic group regarded as heretical that had been hated for centuries! I don't think that's an accident. Jesus was undercutting the basis for identity politics in his day!

That's the first answer that the gospel has for us this morning. We can't treat those with whom we strongly disagree harshly or aggressively or as if they don't matter. Nor can we malign people made in the image of God. They are our neighbors, whom Jesus calls us to love. We can certainly disagree with them, but we must do so in a loving, respectful way. And there is more.

The church has not been exempt from these identity issues, even in the heady, early times right after the coming of the Spirit. Listen to this story from Acts 6. *Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.² And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.³ Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task,⁴ while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."⁵ What they said pleased the whole community...* (Acts 6:1-5a)

The church was receiving both Hebrew and Greek-speaking members, and there were, naturally, cultural differences. As they were caring for those who were poor among them, the Greek-speaking widows

were being neglected. This is not surprising, as all the early church leaders were Jewish! However, the apostles listened to their complaint, and with the community, developed a plan to care for everyone. The response of the apostles was the antithesis of identity politics. They listened to the concerns of the minority and used their power to make sure they were cared for. That's the way leadership in the church or in government is supposed to work! It should be looking for ways to enhance the common good. As the Apostle Paul bluntly puts it in Phil. 2, ⁴*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* (Phil. 2:4) This is the opposite of identity politics- looking out for the interests of others.

Then Paul takes it a step further in Galatians 3.

²⁷*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* ²⁸*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (Gal. 3:27-28) This is truly radical. Paul says that our identity with Christ supersedes all other labels and social strata in this world. No more Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, Democrat or Republican, white or black, etc. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. This adds another layer to the response of the gospel to identity politics. It tells us that those identities are not as important as our unity in Jesus. And since many politicians on both sides of the aisle claim to be followers of Jesus,

according to Paul, we have more in common with our political opponents than we have differences! Because we are all following the same Lord!

So, the gospel calls us to love all of our neighbors as ourselves; it calls majorities to look out for the needs of minorities; and it says that at least for those who follow Jesus, we are not to allow our differences to divide us. Now some of you may be saying, “Dave, this all sounds nice, but the Republicans and Democrats I know are not ready to stand in a circle, hold hands, and start singing “Kumbaya” anytime soon! Let’s get real! The divisions between us are real and deep.”

You’re right. But the divisions were at least as real and deep in the early church when these words were written. And, according to Jesus, Christians have a role to play in a divided world; We are to be peacemakers! Jesus said, ⁹*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* (Matt. 5:9) Now there’s a challenge, but a challenge that may very well affect the future of our nation! So, how might we go about being peacemakers? Here are a couple suggestions:

First, let’s be careful with our use of social media. Refuse to pass along inflammatory or misleading tweets or articles or videos or whatever. Use a fact-checker of some sort to be sure that what you’re sending is true. Refuse to pass along the sorts of things that heighten the divisions

between us, rather than moving us toward peace. Be sure you're not contributing to the divisions.

Second, call our leaders to higher standards. Whether they are Democrat or Republican, local or national or statewide leaders, we Christians should insist that our politicians be honest and refrain from personal attacks on others. It's hard to believe that this seems like a radical request, but we've moved so far away from civility and mutual respect, that it is! Nevertheless, we should insist on it and even let our votes be conditioned on it. This uncivil behavior is making it impossible for us to work together to solve the real problems that confront us.

Third, take part in a group like the "Politics, Facts, and Civility" group that met in Gettysburg under the leadership of former Gettysburg College professor, Kerr Thompson. He puts together discussion groups composed of people with lots of different points of view, and encourages them to talk to each other, expressing their differences in a civil manner. It seems to me that GPC, a church with lots of different political points of view in it, could be a leader of this kind of peacemaking in our community. Perhaps we could start a number of these kinds of groups to help us remember how to listen to others and express our own viewpoints in ways that respect others and keep Jesus' command to love them.

Fourth, as Christians, the Spirit of Jesus Christ lives in each of us, desiring to teach us and lead us and empower us. Pray for the Spirit of Jesus to lead you and fellow Christians in this area.

I'm sure there are other, Spirit-inspired ways to engage with this problem. How do you think we can fulfill Jesus' command to be peacemakers in a time of divisive identity politics? How can you? I believe it is not only a Christian thing to do, but a patriotic one as well.