



“Seeking the Common Good: Learning to Love”

Sunday, February 16, 2020

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Matthew 22:34-40

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Our first reading comes from Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, to remind the divided congregation that they are one body, called to serve the common good.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Our gospel reading today scripture reading comes from Matthew 22, where Jesus shares what is commonly known as the greatest commandment. Listen for God’s word.

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

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Love is at the core of the gospel, at the core of Christian faith. Jesus came proclaiming God’s kingdom, sharing a message of love.

The Bible tells us that God loves the world, that nothing can separate us from God’s love.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. --John 3:16

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. --Romans 8:38-39

Our calling is to love in return. Jesus commands us to love God, love our neighbors, to love one another, and even love our enemies.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, we are urged to do more than talk about love. It's not just words, but action.

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. —1 John 3:17-18

And loving our neighbor doesn't mean silently acquiescing to them. Sometimes the loving thing is to speak out. Ephesians teaches us to speak the truth in love.

So our calling, our mandate, our commandment is to love.

Loving one another is hard work, especially in our world today, with political and social divisions about as sharp as they've ever been.

So we launched this seven week series to think about the common good, and ultimately about love—which is appropriate, just a couple days after Valentine's Day.

We've been trying to encourage civil conversations and faithful engagement, with sermons, adult ed classes, and small groups, focused on divisive issues of the day:

Abortion, Gun violence, Race, Immigration, The LGBTQ+ Community

BEING TAUGHT TO AVOID TALKING ABOUT POLITICS AND RELIGION HAS LED TO A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS AND RELIGION.



WHAT WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN TAUGHT WAS HOW TO HAVE A CIVIL CONVERSATION ABOUT A DIFFICULT TOPIC.

Previous sermons are available on our website, and hardcopies are on the bulletin board outside the sanctuary.

One of the primary intentions of this series has been to do the exact opposite of the “conventional wisdom” that many of us have heard through life: Do not talk about religion or politics.

While it's good to avoid sanctimonious conversations, and it's well intentioned to avoid disagreements, we need to talk about religion and politics in polite and honest and humble and helpful ways.

Some of you were here in early January when we launched the series and I suggested in the sermon that day that there is more to the Christian life than being comfortable, that in fact sometimes to be faithful we need to be uncomfortable, which helps us grow.

So here we are at the end of the series—and as we expected, we have NOT solved all of the world's problems, and we do NOT all agree on these issues.

The work has to continue. And the work begins with ourselves.

Part of the challenge is changing our own attitudes.

Too many of us seem to be addicted to self-righteous anger, as if we want to be outraged. I know I'm not alone in catching myself looking at news stories or comments and thinking, "I wonder what this jerk is going say...." We like to feel superior to "those people."

We people like to find the most ridiculous position or extreme statement on the other side, and then assume that anyone on that end of the spectrum thinks the same way.

Here in Madison, things lean a little left of center, and people often point out the issues on the right. But it goes both ways.

Jon Stewart, who hosted "The Daily Show" for many years, noticed that sometimes folks on the liberal side were guilty of what they complained about. In a 2016 interview, Jon Stewart said:

"There's now this idea that anyone who voted for Trump has to be defined by the worst of his rhetoric.... In the liberal community, you hate the idea of creating people as a monolith. 'Don't look at Muslims like a monolith. They are individuals, and it would be ignorant.' But everybody who voted for Trump is a monolith—is a racist. The hypocrisy is ...real in our country." (Cited in *A House United*, p 158)

All of us need to be mindful of our biases and generalizations.

One thing I have re-learned over the past seven weeks is that people are complex and diverse, and we don't all fit easily into categories.

Like the person who is very anti-abortion, but also working for tighter gun laws and an end to capital punishment.

Or like the mayor of a small city near Pittsburgh, who is farther left than Bernie Sanders, but he supports fracking.

We are complex and it's hard and unfair to slap labels on each other.

Part of what I think we need to do is really listen for ideas and recognize that people in the opposite political party might have some good ideas. If we dismiss them because of their name or label, we're missing out.

Last year at a high school graduation the student speaker shared an inspiring quote and attributed it to a popular politician. People cheered, as most people in that community were on the same end of the political spectrum.

The student however paused and clarified and said the quote was actually from a popular politician of the opposite party. The clapping and cheering stopped. Someone booed. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/us/graduate-quotes-trump-obama.html>)

We need to move beyond labels and simple generalizations. We need to be people of integrity and substance and reflection. We need to find ways to work together.

“The West Wing” was a well-loved TV show about a Josiah Bartlet, a Democratic president trying to serve faithfully while dealing with the complicated issues of politics and culture. In one delightful scene, he meets with a Republican Senator Max Lobell. (Cited in *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*, p 127)

President Bartlet: You know what we’re doing here, right?

Senator Lobell: We’re going to talk about soft money.

Bartlet: We’re going to do more than talk about it.

Lobell: Okay.

Bartlet: We agree on nothing, Max.

Lobell: Yes, sir.

Bartlet: Education, guns, drugs, school prayer, gays, defense spending, taxes - you name it, we disagree.

Lobell: You know why?

Bartlet: Because I'm a lily-livered, bleeding-heart, liberal, egghead communist.

Lobell: Yes, sir. And I'm a gun-toting, redneck son-of-a-bitch.

Bartlet: Yes, you are.

Lobell: We agree on that.

Bartlet: We also agree on campaign finance.

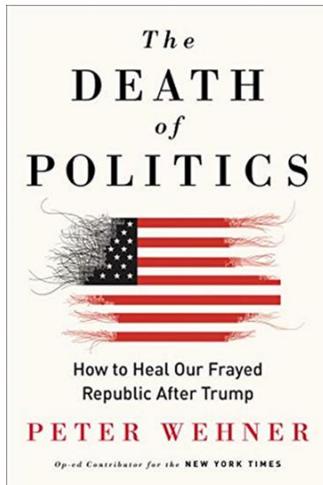
Lobell: Yes sir

Bartlet: So, Max.

Lobell: Yes, sir?

Bartlet: Let’s work together on campaign finance.

What a great example. Integrity, compromise, courage, common sense—things we need in the world today.



This example highlights exactly what Peter Wehner says we need, in his 2019 book *The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump*.

For those who don't know, Peter Wehner is probably not well-liked by those on either end of the spectrum. He's a conservative Republican who has worked with several Republican administrations, but he was one of the earliest and most outspoken critics of now President Donald Trump.

He writes a hopeful book about our strong foundations as a country and how we can find our way again. The Abraham Lincoln quote in your bulletin was cited in Wehner's book.

Wehner writes:

“What’s broken can be mended. We’re not in grip of forces we can’t control. We can reverse what has gone wrong; we can build on what has gone right.... That requires us, person by person, to assume the mantle of citizenship.” (p. 5)

His chapter on the value of words is worth the cost of the book, and then the following chapter unpacks the virtues of moderation, compromise, and civility.

As Christians, as those who have been commanded to love one another and to love our enemies, we ought to be leaders in things like moderation, compromise, and civility.

And he makes the point clearly that compromise is not capitulation or being weak. In our world today, in our churches today, working for compromise, working for the common good while holding one's convictions is arguably the most courageous and helpful thing one can do.

We Christians ought to be leading the way in working together in working for the common good. Sadly too many churches are just as polarized as our culture.

Wouldn't it be great if there were examples of churches working together?

Well guess what, we just participated in one example, with the Collaboration Project, which brought together a variety of congregations in Madison around the issues of feeding hungry families.

I read another example of churches getting together in the delightful short book, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*. Author Allen Hilton tells about a mission project in Texas that was supported by two churches.

These two congregations ended up working together on a schoolhouse in a community with lots of children but no building. So they got together on the construction project.

Nice story, but nothing exciting until we realize that one congregation is an open and affirming church, which means they are intentionally very welcoming of the LGBT community. And the other congregation was a Southern Baptist congregation, part of a denomination that condemns homosexuality as a sin and actively tries to “change” people from being gay.

But out of a shared sense of mission, along with a little bit of not making initial judgments, a super conservative church and a super liberal church were able to work together, for the common good.

As author Allen Hilton says:

This very red church and this very blue church continued hammering schoolhouse walls instead of each other because they momentarily changed their priorities. (p. 127)

I wonder what came of that, if people were able to listen and learn from each other, after establishing new priorities and common ground, some relationship.

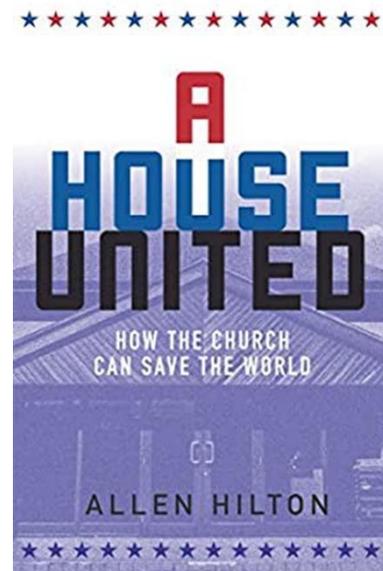
I thought about the importance of relationship recently, while visiting an older member of the congregation. This person told me about some health issues, saying how much they like their doctor. The person told me how they didn't like to take medicine, but they reluctantly agreed to do what this doctor suggested.

If there was no relationship there, if the doctor had been blunt and rude and said "You need to take this medicine" I don't think the patient would have done so. But because there was a relationship rooted in kindness and respect, the patient was able to hear what the doctor was saying.

When we get to know people, rather than just labeling them, good things happen.

As I said in the beginning of this series, I'm not going to tell you how to think on particular issues. But I do have three ways I want to challenge you.

1. Be an active and involved and informed citizen. Vote—we have elections on Tuesday. We need to be involved in the process.
2. We need to keep reading, praying, and thinking—recognizing that God isn't finished with any of us yet.
3. And we need to connect with other people. I'm so glad we're doing small groups, and I look forward to more. I hope you'll find ways to keep talking and volunteering and meeting people—maybe even people who think differently than you.



I am hopeful that we can together keep learning about the world around us and how we as Christians can be involved and engaged, with the hope that we can serve God's kingdom and really learn to love one another.

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Last week Chelsea told a story about her mom. That reminded me of a story about my mom, who died just over five years ago.

My mom was a wonderful person. She brought me and my brothers to church when we were kids, even when we weren't very enthusiastic about it. She helped plant seeds of faith. She was good and kind and loving in all sorts of ways. She was also very traditional and very conservative.

Fast forward to 12 and a half years ago. My brother John died unexpectedly in 2007 at age 45.

John was my best friend. It was a horrible shock, and I was devastated. I still miss him to this day. But I can only imagine my mom's grief. No parent should have to experience the death of a child. I know people in this congregation have. Very sad.

So we had a memorial service at our home church in Connecticut, with Graham, my mother's beloved pastor officiating. (Graham is a good friend of mine, and he was actually here for my installation seven years ago.) It was a beautiful service on a very sad day.

For various reasons we waited to put John's ashes in the ground until a few months later. We picked a weekend that worked for everyone's schedule, but then we realized that Graham wasn't available for the committal ceremony in the church memory garden.

I knew my mom would be upset that Graham couldn't be there, as he was her favorite pastor. (I didn't want to be the pastor that day.)

But their Parish Associate John was available. Except Pastor John is gay. I mentioned that my mom was very traditional and conservative. She was not what you would call very progressive about human sexuality.

So I was thinking this wasn't going to work. When I asked her about it, she said something like "Oh everyone knows about John, but we like him. He's wonderful."

If we had said, "Mom, the only pastor available is gay" my mother would not have been happy. But she knew John and she didn't see him as a category, she saw him as a human being.

So Pastor John officiated at our brief service in the church memory garden in early 2008, when my brother's ashes were given their final resting place. On the worst day of my mom's life, this "gay pastor" ministered to us all, and my mom gave him a big hug and told me that he did a wonderful job.

Mom wasn't out waving rainbow flags in the Gay Pride parades, but she learned to see things a little differently. And Pastor John got to see a different side of someone who was definitely not an LGBT activist.

We are called, we are commanded to love God and love one another. That love starts when we listen to each other, when we learn from each other, and it grows as we stay rooted in and open to the persistent love of God. Amen.