

The Elephant / Donkey in the Room

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We are continuing our series titled, “In the World – Not of It” today. I admit that this one is a little scary to give. My sincere hope is that you hear what I’m saying, not taking it as being “political,” or being on the attack, or demonstrating support for one side or the other. I’m going to be addressing how politics could impact our little church, and what we can do about it. Politics is definitely a huge thing “in the world” today, and how do we navigate it as citizens of the Kingdom of God?

The only way I can get through this is by starting with a few dad jokes:

Ronald Reagan famously quipped, "Politics is supposed to be the second-oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first". In a similar vein, a popular joke features a well-dressed man being held up by a mugger. When the man indignantly declares he is a U.S. Congressman, the robber replies, "In that case, give me my money!".

Did you hear that Republicans and Democrats came together in Congress to allow medicinal marijuana for the purpose of relieving arthritis pain? So, there is joint support for joints for joint support.

The most unfair thing about American politics is that we get 50 choices for Miss America, but only two for the president.

Washington, D.C., is a city where many politicians are waiting to be discovered, and an equal number are afraid they might be.

This last one is sadly true: The Canadian parliament was discussing disease spread on the parliament floor, and somehow this turned into a serious discussion about zombies. It became pretty hilarious, with foreign minister John Baird declaring that they should take zombies seriously because they don’t recognize borders.

Today I am addressing the elephant in the room – and also the donkey in the room. We believe that our congregation is about one third conservative politically, one third liberal politically, and one third in the middle; or as one person said to me recently – “I don’t give a rip either way!”

There are lots of ways we can manage this. We could ignore it and continue to sweep it under the rug. We could focus on unity themes. Avoid mentioning controversial political issues. Use broad, inspiring language like love, peace, and togetherness that everyone agrees on. Avoid decision – maximize attendance. This sounds fine in many ways, and to be honest, it's some of what we've done here before. But we are avoiding the truth about ourselves and so miss out on deeper relationships and fellowship. Another approach is to rip off the Band-Aid. I'm going to try another approach. I'm going to hold up a mirror to ourselves. I want to speak the truth – but do so gently. We don't need to keep this secret and hidden.

So here it is: We are a body that does not vote the same. We do not see the same policies, the same leaders, the same headlines in the same light. That is true. Let's not pretend otherwise. And that's ok. We should not expect uniformity in politics among us, just like we might have different allegiances to sports teams. The point of my message today is not that we have to change to be like each other or somehow convince someone else to believe and vote like I do. Instead, I want to look at how we can be anchored and unified in a deeper allegiance.

I'm well aware that there is a big football game going on right now, and that most of us side with the Broncos. We're probably in the third or fourth quarter by now. Do you want to know the score? (Go ahead and give it). So relax, you can't change things now, and you can watch the entire thing later, I'm sure. Thank you for being here today.

So there's a unity around the Bronco, but not around the elephant or the donkey. We belong to or have allegiance to different political parties. But I want to suggest that our deepest belonging is to Christ. Not to the donkey or the elephant, but to the Lamb. If our first loyalty is politics, the church will someday break. If our first loyalty is the gospel, the church will live. It comes down to how we identify ourselves. Are we a Democrat or a Republican, libertarian or socialist, independent or party affiliated? If that's first, we're on some shaky ground. Our first allegiance is to the one who gave His life for us, setting us free from the bondage of the world, and freely giving us citizenship in heaven. Yes, our deeply held political and personal convictions are part of who we are. There is no shame for that, regardless of who you voted for.

You may be wondering right now – is this even possible? Look at Jesus’ disciples. How did a Jewish Zealot, committed to bringing down Roman rule, end up being a brother to Matthew, a tax collector for the Romans? Their allegiance was to their rabbi, to Christ. Did Simon and Matthew change their political beliefs? I have no idea. But they paled in comparison to their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, the one coming to save the world. I wonder if they ever had a political discussion while on the road following Jesus. Who knows!

I would like to suggest a strategy for addressing all of this within our church. Regardless of what “side” you are on, you are ultimately responsible for yourself, for your own convictions, for your beliefs. Too many times we are looking to prove the other faction wrong. That is not our job as Christians. If what someone believes truly goes against what God desires, then the Holy Spirit will convict, just as with sin. Think of it – if we spent all of our time in the pulpit pointing out all of your sins (forget about my sins), then how are people drawn to the love of Christ? They’re not! At best, someone might come to the Lord out of fear. Remember what our friend John told us in his first letter? “Perfect love casts out fear!” There is no fear in love.

So instead of trying to prove ourselves right and others wrong, we should focus instead on self-examination. Rather than asking, “Is my brother or sister wrong?” we ask, “What do I need to confess about my own heart? Where have I let fear or pride speak louder than love?” Think about your most closely held political standards and convictions. What is driving them? Is it fear, or it’s sibling, anger? Is it pride or haughtiness – are we saying in our hearts that we are glad we are not like the sobbing tax collector praying in the temple, but are righteous in our stance? No one gets to hide from this and be honest. Will your beliefs change? I don’t know. That is not the point. Instead, are we being transparent and humble as we speak with those with differing political beliefs? Are we able to listen, to understand? It is not our job to make them understand – that is their responsibility. It is our job to be responsible for ourselves.

If we don’t approach each other in this way, we end up in what our scriptures read today call foolish and ignorant controversies and quarrels. Listen to Proverbs: “. If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet. A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man

quietly holds it back.” But if we come together in humility and love, what happens? Again from Proverbs: “The poor man and the oppressor meet together; the LORD gives light to the eyes of both.” Both are enlightened! What are we missing out on because we are not having these kinds of conversations?

I love our passage from Paul’s letter to Titus today. In essence, when the kindness of our Savior came, he saved us through his mercy from being foolish, disobedient and led astray. Then Paul makes this amazing statement: “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.” “Foolish controversies” is translated from the Greek words *mōros* and *zētēsis*. It could just as easily mean empty or useless debate, line of questioning, or even speculation. In Second Timothy, Paul calls these “ignorant controversies,” literally without learning, instruction, or chastening. When we are not informed about why and how the other side believes, when we only listen to sources we already agree with, we are ignorant. I don’t know about you, but that’s a bit of a bitter pill for me to swallow. I am very guilty of this. Can I ask my brother or sister why they hold certain convictions, and quietly listen to what they say, striving to understand? At most, I may be in a position to “correct with gentleness,” always kind, always willing to teach with humility, and patient when enduring evil, as Paul instructs us in the Timothy passage.

We are citizens of heaven, and we are on display in front of the world. I will say that we as our local church have done well. This political diversity is built into the DNA of Elizabeth Presbyterian. I’m lifting the curtain today so that we are even better equipped to deal with these differences within us. This is not a wagon we want to fall off of.

In 2018, Bunni Pounds failed to represent the Republican Part in Texas Fifth Congressional district. During the nomination battle, 43,000 votes were cast, and Pounds lost by just 2,700 votes to Rep. Lance Gooden (R-Texas), who would go on to win the seat. Pounds not only raised more money than Gooden but felt she had a better managed campaign. Despite losing, Pounds walked away with all her bills paid. But as for her opponent, “his consultants had floated all of his invoices. So, if you could imagine — his TV, his mail, his radio ads, his consulting fees, all had been not billed,” said Pounds. Losing this way frustrated Pounds and a resentment over what had happened began building in her heart. “So, the

injustice of that was digging at my heart. Well, a year later, I heard the Lord say, ‘You’re not going to get through this if you don’t do something drastic to impact your heart,’ Pounds recalled. God was calling Pounds to heal her heart. She phoned her opponent, took him out for lunch, and offered to help him pay off the \$50,000 in outstanding bills he still owed. Gooden agreed. “And we did a huge party, and I fundraised towards that, and we all paid for it,” Pounds said. “All of our campaign staff, consultants — we all laid our offenses, bitterness and unforgiveness down at the feet of Jesus and walked out of there completely free.”

What a great testimony! This is how we want the world to see us – that any divisions among us with worldly politics is completely eclipsed by heavenly politics – the politics of Christ’s love. And see what happened in this instance? The loser, Pounds, and her staff were healed of bitterness. There are so many dividends from this kind of humble love and understanding.

To recap, we must start with the truth, that we do not agree on everything. But we all belong as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, His family. We bear responsibility for ourselves first and foremost and look to our own hearts for any need of healing or correction. And then we invite our church family members to engage with us, treating them with humility and willingness to understand. Our citizenship with Christ comes first. Everything else remains in the world, but we hold ourselves to a higher standard.

We may still disagree tomorrow. But if we leave here knowing that the love of Christ in us is greater than our differences, then the world will see Christ more clearly through us. That is our call.

Amen.