

Sermon 01-05/06-2019
 “Politics and Religion” - Rev. MarkusWegenast
 Titus 2:11-13

*¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing **salvation to all**,^[a]¹² training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are **self-controlled, upright, and godly**,¹³ **while we wait** for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior,^[b] Jesus Christ.*

1) Intro

Happy new year to all of you again. It is exciting to walk into a new year together. There will be great things happening in 2019, new friendships will be made, new experiences gained. There will certainly be challenges also.

One of the great challenges for everyone living at this particular point in time is getting along with others. It seems like it's more challenging today than it was just 20 years ago. Politics and the way we debate social questions have become a lot more fierce. Unfortunately, our politicians and the media are not exactly role models when it comes to learning on how to get along with each other.

What do we do about it? Sure, we could set politics and controversial social matters aside and just focus on getting along - but the question is: are we supposed to do that? Are we supposed to be ignorant about the fact that we disagree on issues of life including worldviews, social issues, religion and yes, even politics?

Talking about politics in church is always a bit of an iffy thing. I too feel that the church is not an arena that needs to repeat every discussion that is already debated in the media and other outlets. But I do see that the church has a responsibility to address political issues in the broader sense of its definition:

Listen to this broad definition of politics:

Politics is “the total complex of relations between people living in [a] society” - Meriam Webster.

In other words: Politics in the broadest sense is about getting along in our society. And the Bible has actually quite a bit to say about this.

2) Christmas and Politics

The Bible passage we just heard had something to say about the “complex of relations” – it makes a powerful connection between the purposes of God in this world (salvation) and how it influences our conduct in this world (until Christ returns).

It is so interesting to me that according to the Revised Common Lectionary this little passage is supposed to be preached about at every single Christmas Eve service. I have preached about this passage before on Christmas Eve and I meant to do it two weeks ago but I decided against it... I want to show you something:

Would you look if you have access to a pew Bible and pull it out? Find this Bible passage in Titus chapter 2. It should be around page 202/214.

It's a beautiful passage from scripture and it fits the Christmas Eve context wonderfully: It is about salvation which Christ's birth brought, it is about conduct which salvation aims for, it is about hope of Christ's second coming...

But check out the 2 verses immediately before Verse 11.

⁹Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, ¹⁰not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.

What do you make out of that? Here we are catapulted not only into the midst of an explicit political theme – it is highly controversial too. This passage can be seen as justifying slavery. This passage can be used to argue that the Bible is just too dangerous a book that should be abolished. Neither conclusion would be right but it shows something: it shows us that the Bible is not a book that avoids controversial issues about “complex relations”– and I guess: neither should we!

It's not my goal to discuss the Biblical perspective on slavery with you – it is my goal to explore how political questions relate to how we get along. And again, by politics I mean: **“the total complex of relations between people living in [a] society.”**

We live in a democracy within a republic and that greatly influences how we go about our exploration. Because it means that we are free to not only discuss but to influence the political questions of our day and age. And you have to agree: We can't figure out how to get along if we ignore essential issues of the day. God is hugely interested in us getting along [vgl. Memory verse] and he has a vast amount of expectations and guidance for us.

3) Democracy and Christianity/getting along

Let me start by asking this: What does it mean to you to get along with others? Does getting along with someone mean that you agree with him/her? It's tempting to say yes. Sure it's easier to get along with people that are likeminded – but we realize this can't be the essence of what it means to get along with someone.

That, for example, would mean that a lot of marriages in our church are made up of couples that aren't getting along with each other! I know a lot of couples that say that they disagree sharply on many issues of life and society – but I don't know one single person that would say they don't get along with their spouse because of it!

It is a great thing when people agree, friendships can be built upon it – but they don't have to! I assume that many of you have great friends that hold very opposing viewpoints – but that doesn't mean that you don't get along with them, right? So what does getting along with each other look like? What does it particularly look like among Christians, among Christians who live in a democracy where by default we are encouraged – yes: mandated – to dare to discuss issues that are divisive?

Are you ready to spend 9 weeks on this subject?! I feel that God wants us to do that – and I believe that God desires for us to love each other so much that we engage with each other in such an important subject.

In America we live in both a democracy and a republic. That means that not all decisions are being made by the majority. There are laws that protect the rights of those that are not in the majority and that is probably a good thing.

But nevertheless, what that means is that by default our elected politicians have to be willing to fight because they represent voters with different and opposing demands.

Imagine what would happen if politicians weren't willing to do that. What if they said: 'Yeah, we really should talk about how to keep our citizens healthy, but it's too controversial an issue – the other party would never go for it, so let's rather ignore it and talk about things that are less controversial.'

No! That's not how a democratic republic works.

And I want to say: That's not how **our** life together works either. Getting along means that we have to figure out how we can address important issues, even controversial ones, without losing our respect for each other, and without losing our heart for each other – without losing our ability to get along with each other. As Christians we should be in a prime position to accomplish that...

4) Getting along when we disagree

I say that, but I'm also quite aware that we have some obstacles to overcome as Christians. What is the number one rule that's been 'hammered' into us for years? At family gathering what do you not talk about? "You don't talk politics and religions." – Right?

"If you want to get along with your neighbors, with your coworkers, with your friends at church: don't talk politics and religion." That sentiment has shaped generations. And don't we have to say: We are really good at that – aren't we?

The only time we talk politics and religion seems to be when we are surrounded by likeminded people. **Then** we feel comfortable talking about the politician we can't stand or the party we don't like. **Then** we feel safe to talk religion and maybe even make fun of the other religious group we dislike.

It seems that when we're in our safe zone of likeminded people we get greatly along complaining about the president as long as we know that the others in our group think the same way. Or we get greatly along criticizing liberal Christianity as long as we don't have one of its proponents sitting among us.

But what happens when we are not in a homogenous environment? How do we talk about tough important issues when we know we will rub others off with our opinion?

Would you agree when I say: we have lost our skill to do that?

Take a look at our text from Titus. What is his admonishment for us in terms of our behavior? According to this passage our salvation is displayed in three powerful behavioral aspects:

- Be self-controlled/ sober
- Be upright/ just
- Be godly/ devout

Let's apply this to the two examples I just used: If you do not agree with the partisan politics of the current administration, how do you talk about it in a self-controlled, upright, godly way? If you have trouble with liberal Christians, how do you talk **about** them and how do you talk **to** them in a self-controlled, upright, godly way?

It is a skill that we have lost in our endeavor to be “politically correct” and “not talk politics and religion”! We're giving up on the privilege the citizens in a constitutional democracy have. What's worse: we are giving up on the privilege the citizens of the kingdom of God have.

Please don't think I'm talking down on you on this. I'm in the same boat with you – I too have been growing up in the “you don't talk politics or religion” mentality. I would like to learn together with you how we can get along when we don't agree without ignoring our differences. Isn't it fair to say that God wants us to learn how we can disagree and do that in a self-controlled, upright, godly way?

Let's hear an example of hope:

I went to a small meeting of area clergy and community leaders last year. I sat at a table with the CEO of Goodwill Industries and the pastor of the Appleton Alliance (AA) church and they told me about their partnership in moving the AA free clinic to one of the Goodwill stores.

Now, you have to understand that GW and the AA church are miles away on some very significant social issues (for example stands on homosexuality). So I asked how they overcame this difference. And the CEO looked at me a bit bedazzled and said (I paraphrase): ‘It wasn't even an issue. We both agreed enough on the goodness of the free clinic program and this common goal for the common good was greater than our differences.

Getting along is not impossible!

- You can do great things together with people you don't agree with.
- You can do great things when you're self-controlled, upright, and godly.
- You can do great things while you wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.