

## **DECIDE**

### **A Political Sermon in Church**

We are providing sermons with one-word titles. Today, the word is **decide**.

Violence has absolutely no part to play in the American political process. Yet, violence is playing a core part in the current American political campaign (and not only in the two apparent assassination attempts.)

There is now widespread concern that the November election will not end well. That American democracy, once a beacon to the world, has frayed to a breaking point. The American political process is brutal and has been brutalized.

The result is a sort of reciprocal delegitimization, where a political opponent is no longer a normal political competitor, but an existential enemy. There is a degradation of political and public discourse.

Style over substance. Image over issues. Lies over facts. Distractions over policy.

Praise is the language of trust and identity. In the Church, our praise affirms the trustworthiness of God, the dependability of God. Praise asserts our reliance on God. Praise also requires that we trust our sisters and brothers. Praise establishes who is who.

The Lord is God; God made us and we are God's people. To praise the Lord is to acknowledge God as our shepherd and ourselves as God's sheep. Praise affirms that we need the shepherd's care. That we are completely dependent on the Lord. Praise is the language of the Church.

Caution. Praise is also the language of politics. Political identity is rooted in choosing, even praising, a certain ideology or system or candidate.

I call you back. Our salvation is not in a party or a platform. Putting your trust and praise in a candidate will only disappoint you.

Since our foundation as Church is the praise of God, we are free to act in a new and revolutionary way. We are not defined or constricted by ideology. Our witness is to God and God alone. Every other god melts away in the praise of the Lord.

As people of faith, we are allowed, even encouraged, to enter the political realm free of false expectations, loyalties and illusion.

The praise of God declares that we no longer see the world as the world would have us see it; we see God in and through all things. If we belong to Christ, the work of reconciliation is our politics.

Again, your allegiance and your loyalty are not to a political party. Your allegiance and loyalty are to be reserved only for God.

Politics will not fix this mess. It has the ability to make things worse.

Remember when St. Paul wrote, “Do not be conformed by this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind?” (Romans 12:2)

In other words, do not let the world squeeze you into its mold. Conformity to the world is more than a failure of lifestyle or politics; conformity to the world is a failure to praise. A failure to put God above all things. To put lesser things first.

God wants us to have our minds renewed so that we may know the will of God, that we may know what God is saying to us, that we may know (in the language of Paul) what is good and acceptable and perfect. Without this transformation, we will continue to conform to the patterns and structures of this world, thinking politics will save us. We cannot know the will of God when our attachment to parties and candidates clouds our vision and obstructs our hearing.

Politics is about power, about who rules. When we place our allegiance and loyalty within our praise of God, we stand free before the world. We know who rules and we know where true power resides. Nothing is more threatening to a system than people who are free of its control, free of its rewards and punishments.

I often hear, “Pastor, please don’t talk politics in the church?” What? Nothing is more political than swearing your allegiance to Jesus Christ. Being a follower of Jesus is the ultimate political choice. Praising God is not just a religious act, but a political act.

Remember when Pilate said to Jesus, “Do you know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?” And Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above.” (John 19:10-11)

Pilate, the symbol of Roman power, expected at least a modicum of respectful worship from all people. He reminded Jesus that he held complete power over him, the power of life and death. But Jesus was driven by a higher authority. By doing so, Jesus stood free of anything Pilate could do to either win him over or to defeat him.

Jesus’ security was rooted in his praise of God. That’s why he was a political threat to Pilate. Jesus demonstrated a new kind of politics, a new kind of security and freedom and he offers that same security and freedom to us. Jesus knew to whom he belonged and he invites us to remember to whom we belong. He points us toward praise, he invites us to praise.

So, yes, please vote and work, especially in the socio-political realm of life and especially in the upcoming elections. But know your identity is not found in your politics. Your identity is found in being a child of God.

As your pastor, I do not endorse a party or a candidate. I always think of Jesus' words to his parents when they found him in the temple, "I must be about my Father's business." And that's where I stand politically. I must be about my Father's business. How can what is political advance the will of God? That's the issue for me.

I will make no endorsement. What I do want to endorse to you are three things:

First, I ask you as people of faith to engage the process. To talk about the issues, to decide, as people who follow the way of Jesus, what you care about and more importantly, why.

When we were two years old, we learned that shouting never gets us our way. I am asking you to not be involved in angry debate. I'm also asking you to not try to convert somebody to what you believe. Give them room to disagree with you.

I'm inviting you to be engaged in respectful grace-filled dialogue with each other in the weeks ahead. To be able to say, "This is why I'm voting the way I am" without trying to convince somebody of anything else.

What I'm trying to tell you is your faith dictates how you live in the world. I want to encourage you to use your faith to think more clearly about the issues.

The second thing I'm asking you to do is have a voting plan not just for yourself but for the other people in our congregation and in your family and on your street who may have trouble getting to the ballot box or fill out their absentee ballot. Why don't you make a plan and see how you can help them vote, especially those who have decided they're too old, too disabled, too busy or that their votes don't matter?

And the third thing I'm asking you to do is pray. Every day from now until the election, pray there will be no more violence on the campaign trail. Pray that poll workers and volunteers will be safe. Pray that anybody who has the right to vote is not denied that right.

Pray for our congregation, as we will be a polling place on election day. That our guests may understand that this is a welcoming holy space where the presence of God is palpable.

Pray that there will be a peaceful transfer of power up and down the ticket. Pray that all over the country we can bring back true dialog and democracy. And, this is a lot, pray that our nation can heal.

This election season has pointed out our differences. We, as people of praise, can pray for healing. As we say in the communion liturgy, "it is our duty and delight" to pray as God's people. We pray that we can, as a nation, do what our mission statement urges: love God, love others, serve. We have to find a way forward.

I have selected some excellent online resources for your reflection regarding American politics and the Christian faith. They are listed in your bulletin right below this sermon title. I believe they are worth your time to read and reflect.

And now I end this sermon the same way just about every political candidate ends their campaign speech (except I really mean it!)

God bless you and God bless the United States of America.

INTERFAITHAMERICA RESOURCE

<https://www.interfaithamerica.org/resources/faith-in-elections/>

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA RESOURCE

<https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/ELCAVotes>

ARTICLE FROM LIVING LUTHERAN MAGAZINE

<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2024/08/62448/>