

## Preaching on Issues of the Day

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This sermon was the opening address for a group assembled specifically to address civil discourse in America. Featuring members of the United States House of Representatives (both Republicans and Democrats) along with nationally recognized voices from the Episcopal Church, the conference was concerned with pivoting from our current milieu to a place of cooperation and collaboration.

### *Sermon*

Good evening! I'm delighted to be with you in this place and attending to this important topic, "Civil Discourse in America." The question hanging over this conference is very specific: How do we follow Jesus given the thickening fog of incivility in our political discourse in our nation? Every sermon needs a biblical text. I choose that old standby, 1 Corinthians 13: "Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am as a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." But it is the eleventh verse of that chapter that I want to emphasize. There Paul says, "When I was a child, I thought as a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child. But, when I became a man," a woman, "I put away childish things." What I think Paul is trying to say to his community then and to our community now, even our country is, grow up! This is important because youth comes but once, but immaturity can last a lifetime! The heart of what I want to say tonight is very simple: by virtue of our baptism, we are different.

By the grace of God, we are growing up into the full stature of Christ. Daily. Hourly. Usually reluctantly. But nevertheless growing up. And if that is true, then when it comes to politics, we are trans-political! That is, we are in the world of politics, but we are not of the world of politics. We are in politics but bigger than politics. Especially the incivility of politics. Of course we should be an educated and active

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citizenry, but we are ultimately not defined by politics. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Our citizenship is in heaven." I would remind us there is no Republican or Democratic section of heaven. Which is to say, growing up, if it means anything, means clarity about ultimate allegiance. Our first allegiance is to God as we understand God in the life, ministry, example, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Which is to say, despite the increasing complexity and velocity of modern life, we refuse to allow the corresponding bewilderment to drive us to the blasphemy of self-sufficiency or rank tribalism. You and I have been given and have accepted the high calling of partnership with God. And the substance of that partnership is to be demonstrating in the real, beautiful, and broken world two things—just two things—the irreducibility of God and the irreducibility of neighbor. Our refreshed loyalty to these two tenets will break the adolescent appeal and power of loathing—loathing of the other and loathing of political opposition. Loyalty to God is a greater power than the loathing of opponent. What that means practically, even daily, is that you and I must do the interior work of purging from ourselves every residue of contempt. Contempt for other has become the new, practical, consensus-building American ethos. Sadly, contempt for other has deep roots in the history of our republic as a means to political and economic ends. But, it seems, especially in the last couple of decades, this phenomenon has found new zeal. It is a no-brainer that this phenomenon has been supercharged by the rise of the twenty-four-hour, perpetually breaking news, sound bite, gotcha journalism culture we live in. And yes, both political parties participate in this. And yes, it predates the current administration.

The problem is pernicious because most of us consciously or unconsciously collude with the incivility of the status quo. The problem is, contempt for neighbor in any form—even polite Southern contempt . . . bless your heart—is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. And our maintenance of contempt in all its forms frustrates the working of God's grace.

Given that this conversation is taking place in Lent, I suggest the taking on of a new spiritual discipline to fend off incivility. It is a spiritual discipline to acknowledge, repent, and forsake contempt for neighbor in public and private conversations and thoughts. Even over your social media accounts. This is not about politically correct lips; that is beneath us. Our work is heart work. Civility is about the dignity of others and our commitment to the humility that seeks an

abundant future for all of God's children. This is about transformed hearts. This is about spiritual maturity at the local and cosmic level. When we grow up we remember, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood. We wrestle against powers and principalities." What is necessary here is that you and I begin the slow and essential work of coughing up the asphyxiating mucus of contempt for one another. I can not make this point strongly enough or frequently enough. As bishop of a diocese that spans more than seventy-five counties in middle and north Georgia, I understand it to be part of my job to listen to both Rachel Maddow and Rush Limbaugh. I listen to both because my diocese listens to one or the other. What I have learned is that both news sources share a spirit of contempt for the core constituency of the other. One version could be described as subtle and condescending. And the other unabashedly hostile and vile. But really it just depends on who you ask. Either way, both are trafficking in a substance more addictive than opioids—contempt. But when I listen to either Rush or Rachel I have found a new way to listen. I don't listen as a partisan. I'm not listening for talking points. I listen as an ambassador. I listen as a translator. Again we remember Paul when he says, "I understand the law and order people. And I understand the people who are not under the law. I understand the weak. Because I know my own weaknesses. I take up this relational work so I can save some." That is, so I can point people to things eternal. If we were to talk to Paul this evening he might say to us that there will be no progress in the community, no progress in the nation or the church, until someone decides to be the grown up. Until someone decides to default to curiosity rather than always, always defensiveness. Until someone says eradication of the political opposition has no place in the American family.

But not only that. If we are to really defeat this demon called contempt for neighbor that spawns incivility in all things, we have to acknowledge it's a three-headed demon, each with its own name. Contempt's three heads are smallness, separateness, and superiority. When Paul asks us to grow up, he understands love and immaturity. Love and smallness can't coexist. He doesn't condemn our smallnesses but suggests that while smallness might be a starting point it mustn't be an ending point for us. Smallness has to be confronted and converted.

Separateness is a global heresy that has historic and unique expressions in America. But sadly at the core of the idea of separateness there is a tragic lie. Sure there is a diversity of human experience,

absolutely, but what guides us always is what is at the core, the center. The core is, the coal communities of West Virginia want what the so-called coastal elites want for their children, a hope and a future. We are not a human race. We are a human family.

This brings us to the notion of superiority. Contempt depends on this part perhaps the most. There is something that you and I are supposed to learn in the notion that Jesus is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and yet left his gated community called heaven to live among the day laborers and peasant class of Nazareth. Equality with God puts us beside one another. Not even Jesus is exempt from this idea. Our attainments, achievements, education, and advancements in the Christian context are simply equipment to be harnessed for the common good. Superiority based on race has recently been dealt a death blow by the scientific community. There is this idea about the Mitochondrial Eve. She is the most recent common ancestor of all of humanity. We are inextricably linked. We are all Africans. What affects some affects all. All are children of the same God. Of one blood. DNA doesn't lie.

If the year 1968 in America were to speak to us now, what would she say? She might say, you think you're divided? Huh. What a bunch of amateurs! You remember that in 1968, the war in Vietnam was raging. The generations were divided about our presence in Southeast Asia. There was absolute chaos on college campuses. Martin was killed on a balcony in Memphis and Bobby was killed in a kitchen in California. Not only that, President Johnson went on television to the great surprise of everyone and said that he would not seek nor would he accept the nomination of his party for reelection as president. Talk about chaos. With this grand and surprising gesture LBJ hoped to unite the country. He used the following words to frame his actions: "A house divided cannot stand." Of course he borrowed those words from Jesus. But they ring true now. What LBJ might have also said to us in 1968 and what we might think of now is that not only can a divided house not stand, but neither can an adolescent nation flourish. New maturity must come forward from us if we are to continue this democratic experiment. America is a gangly, acned, clumsy idea as nations go. She is a youthful 242 years old. We have proof of this immaturity in our binary decision making. We say either border security or DACA rather than secure borders and a path to citizenship for the most deserving. We say we desire a strong and ready military without seeing the role of a talented diplomatic corps in the equation

for safety and peace. We argue that the Second Amendment is sacrosanct without seeing that common-sense public safety legislation would refine the public's sense of gun ownership and keep the Second Amendment out of the crosshairs of its opponents. St. Paul says we must grow up in how we think and how we speak and how we understand. This was sage advice in his day and it still is so. Incivility has to be attacked in our hearts as we endeavor to attack it in all the public places that it lives.

I got a recent remedial lesson on this from Ambassador Andrew Young, who I am proud to call friend. As you know, while Dr. King was preaching us into a more perfect union by telling us of his dream, it was Andy Young in cramped back rooms all over the country negotiating progress with all kinds of people. Prior to an event where he was to address school children about appreciating others, I was with him and a few others just chatting and catching up on current events. That's where the growing up began again. He fussed at us about the constant personal attacks on our current president he had heard on the morning news. I could see the shock on peoples face. How could this civil rights icon take such a tone about this president? He went on to remind us that in no place in Dr. King's work would we find a personal attack on any person or group opposing the work of civil rights. He said, you won't even find a personal attack, or contempt for Bull Connor, of fire hoses, and snarling dog fame. No personal attacks ever. Not even for Bull. He said, you see, what you don't understand is that our goal was not the annihilation of the opposition. Our goal was not the humiliation of the opposition. Our goal was transformation. Our goal was to leave room, even for the people we disagreed with the most, for them to retain their dignity. If our aim is to purge incivility from our politics, if our aim is to proclaim that we are an American family, then our work must be to transform the soul of our nation. One encounter at a time. This has been done before. This can be done now with faith, hope, and love, the greatest of these of course being love.

### *Commentary*

Speaking about contemporary issues from the pulpit is dangerous business. Still, the preacher must not actively avoid contemporary issues at the risk of muzzling the gospel. It sounds like an obvious point, but the issue du jour must not be central to the sermon; rather,

the gospel must be the reason for the address. The biblical text must not be dragged kicking and screaming into a conversation about headlines. To be guilty of that practice is to erode the trust necessary between the preacher and the congregation and encumber learning and spiritual growth. Yet when the preacher sees clearly the contrast between the idea of biblical neighborliness and modern living that emerges organically and authentically in sermon preparation, they are duty bound to offer the congregation that insight devoid of shame and judgment or political taint. Always the invitation heard in the sermon needs to be, even when addressing contemporary issues, to a new expression of Christian maturity.