



This sermon is modified from the original preached by Rev. Adam Hamilton, senior pastor at Resurrection, a United Methodist Church, on November 1, 2020 as part of a series called "#LoveYourNeighbor." This series was part of the church's 2020 Kindness Campaign with the theme "Love Your Neighbor," based on Jesus' teaching that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor. You can view this and other sermons in the series [here](#). Links to video illustrations are included.

Jesus, Politics and Religion

When we surveyed Millennial and Gen Z members of our church, one of their top concerns was political polarization and how divided our country was. Then we polled our congregation and found that 97% of you agreed that we are too polarized, and 91% of you agreed that you want to be part of the solution. You want to personally help lower the polarization.

Today's sermon will look at the question of how our Christian faith is meant to impact our politics. No—I will not be endorsing any candidate or party. But we will look at how our faith, whether you are a Republican, Democrat, Independent or anything else, should impact both your political views and how you practice your politics.

I. We Are All Complicit

We need to have this conversation because today something is broken in our political system. It's not working as it is supposed to work. Former Senator and UN Ambassador Jack Danforth and Jesuit Catholic priest Matt Malone, the editor of *America Magazine*, a national Catholic magazine, wrote an op-ed for *the Wall Street Journal* called "A First Step Towards Loving Our Enemies." They had talked about a shared dream they, and we as a church, have for healing the divide in our country. This is a short excerpt from their conversation:

Danforth: If politics is working it's where we go to work through problems, difficult problems, and now we're not doing that. Politics is broken.

Malone: This is always the first question when you give a talk about polarization. It's always, What do I actually do about it? How do I make it real in my life? And the first thing I say is, by acknowledging that we are all in some way complicit in it. If we are able to acknowledge that, then we have control over changing it.

We are all complicit. It's okay to disagree, to do that passionately. But our disagreement so easily becomes dislike and disdain for the other side. It makes it hard for us to stay in relationship with others. We pass on zingers on social media that misrepresent the views of others. We share disinformation. Our politicians too often model this for us in negative advertising that slanders and misrepresents their opponent's character. I never accept the negative claims of a candidate against their opponent without researching myself. I recall one former governor I spoke to about this saying, "You are a man of faith. As you run your upcoming campaign, why not leave off the negative advertising?" He was pretty frank: "We use it because it works." Why does it work? Because we don't take the time to question it. We are complicit.

The Pew Research Center found in a poll taken in 2019 that two thirds of people in *both* parties see those in the other party as closed minded, and 36% of each party sees the other as unintelligent.¹ There are Democrats who see Republicans as racists, and Republicans who see Democrats as immoral. Somewhere, we have to stop.

¹<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/partisan-antipathy-more-intense-more-personal/>

II. How Should Our Faith Should Impact Our Political Views?

Let's consider how our faith should impact our politics. Often I'll hear people say that there should be no connection, that even the talking about faith shaping our politics violates the separation of church and state. But separation of church and state, a phrase popularized by something Thomas Jefferson said in a letter to an association of Baptist Churches in Connecticut shortly after he was elected president in 1801, was about the First Amendment to the Constitution which reads, as relates to religion: **Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.**

What Jefferson meant by the separation of church and state was that the government could not establish a state church, nor could it prohibit the free exercise of religion. It said nothing about people not bringing their faith to bear in thinking about politics.

You **must** engage your faith as it relates to politics. Harold Laswell, a well-known twentieth century political scientist, gave what has become a classic definition of politics in the title of his book, *POLITICS: WHO GETS WHAT, WHEN, HOW*. Decisions about who gets what, when, and how, are **moral** decisions. They involve values, ethics, a certain set of convictions about the meaning of life and what constitutes right and wrong, good and evil and what it means to be human. For most people, at the core of these values, ethics and convictions is their faith.

In our survey 84% of members said that your faith should have an impact on your politics. 11% were neutral and 5% disagreed. So what does that look like? I'd like to suggest at least these two things (there are more, but for purposes of this sermon, just two): Your faith should influence your political vision—what you believe our country, our state, or our local community should be like, and therefore influence your decision-making regarding candidates, policies and laws. And second, your faith should impact your conduct as you practice politics.

Harvard Professor Ron Heifetz described what leaders do. Leaders, including political leaders, are meant to see what is, to have a vision for what should be, and to run on the promise that they will seek to close the gap between the world as it is and the world as it is supposed to be. Their picture of the world as it is supposed to be might be called their political vision. Candidates, from those for president to those for local offices, have a political vision. Read about them, listen to them, try to understand how they see the world as it is. What are the problems they hope to solve? What is their vision of the world as it is supposed to be?

Then, as Christians, we have to decide how their political visions align with the Christian values, ethics and moral vision we hold. 75% of Americans claim to be Christians. Republican or Democrat, we should want those who lead our government to do all the things we count on our government to do as described in the preamble to the Constitution: **To establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty**

to ourselves and our Posterity. But how we define justice and the general welfare should be shaped by our faith.

When I vote for candidates there are three things I'm looking most closely at:

- 1. CHARACTER**
- 2. COMPETENCE**
- 3. CONVICTIONS**

I could list more things, but these three C's are essential to me. All three are important. I'm looking for people whose views align with my understanding of the values of the kingdom of God which the prophets preached and Jesus proclaimed. I'd hope that people on either side of the aisle would seek to make the best case they could for why their candidates have these qualities and, if the individual is a Christian, how their values align with Christian values. The primary value, the central Christian ethic, is love, by which the New Testament does not mean affection, but seeking the good of the other, compassion, kindness, mercy. I long for leaders who model for us, and call us as Americans, to be our best selves. Jesus modeled what this kind of greatness looked like when he said, over and over in the gospels, that greatness is found in serving, in self-giving, in putting the needs of others before your own.

Here's the thing: there are no perfect candidates out there. Neither candidate for President has ever perfectly matched my convictions. Both hold some views that are inconsistent with my convictions, and other positions that are consistent with my convictions. That leads me to look at how consistently their views mirror my understanding of what is right and wrong, good and evil, just and unjust.

III. How Should Our Faith Impact Our Practice of Politics

We may reach different conclusions about what candidate and which political vision is more closely aligned with our faith. Where we should not have disagreement is how our faith should impact how we act, how we practice our politics.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus offered these words: **[Jesus said to them,] "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** (Matthew 5:43-48)

When it comes to politics this is what Jesus calls us to. Not simply loving our neighbor, but even those we perceive as an enemy. This is not a sappy kind of love—it is a love that seeks to bless and befriend. The person of another party is not our enemy. They are our fellow American and likely our brother and sister in Christ. How much more must we aim to love, care for and befriend them?

Today, so many of us are feeling that our nation is as divided as we were before the Civil War. It feels that we are not one but two Americas, and that perhaps it is impossible to remain one. But as Lincoln said, quoting Jesus, A house divided cannot stand. We are divided by churches, divided by neighborhoods, divided in communities and divided by state. Why would we ever divide this nation

again? We have to learn a different way. And I believe love is that way.

You've heard many of these great old stories of politics as it used to be just a few decades ago, but I loved this story that Senator Danforth shared with Father Malone and myself this week. Take a listen, [\[Video link: DANFORTH ON EAGLETON\]](#)

The Wall Street Journal had a story about the Mitchells and the Gateses. These families live in suburban Pittsburg, right next door to one another, and they hold opposing political views. Each had a sign in their yard for their candidate for President (and likely do again this year). But these neighbors, though they disagree on politics, love each other. They can't see the other as unintelligent, or narrow minded, not as immoral or racist—those terms Republicans and Democrats demonize one another with. They can't because their lives are intertwined. They break bread together, their kids play soccer together. Neither anticipates persuading the other, but they have wanted to make clear to others that you can disagree and love your neighbor. So the Journal had a shot of the two families standing together with their signs.

This is what we've want to call ourselves and others to in our *Do Unto Others Campaign*. This is what love looks like. Sen. Danforth, Father Malone and I wondered how we could build on our *Do Unto Others campaign*. How could we create a campaign that goes viral, for people of faith to rise up and be the answer to the polarization that threatens to divide us today?

Jack Danforth is also Father Danforth, an Episcopal priest. He mentioned the moment in the service that many churches call the "Passing of the Peace." One person says to another, **"The peace of Christ be yours."** The other responds, **"The peace of Christ be yours."** Some churches do this at the beginning of the service, and simply call it the greeting. It is a handshake, a smile, a moment to say, "I see you and I'm glad you are here." We say, "I care about you" without knowing the other's politics—we say it even if we do. We make an intentional choice as we stand before the Lord in his house, to say, "Despite our differences, you are my brother or my sister, and I am yours."

Danforth asked, "What if this became our gift to the nation? What if in this increasingly secular and polarized day, we as Christians could model this, teach this, live this?" We don't have to say, "The peace of Christ be yours." That may be too churchy. We could simply say, "I am your friend. Despite our differences, I am your friend." Sen. Danforth said, "We've been trying to come up with next steps, with catch phrases. We love your signs and t-shirts. Maybe we could have, Take a Republican to Lunch day, or Take a Democrat to Lunch day. Don't talk about abortion, or limited government or your favored or unfavored candidates. Share your stories, offer to help. Humanize each other."

That's the big idea. That's what love looks like when it is lived out. If any of you work for ad agencies, help us to take this viral, to help people be inspired by seeing real people with real differences treating one another with respect and dignity. We want to take our *Do Unto Others campaign* to a new level, a campaign to befriend those with whom we disagree.

I'll show you what that might look like. Two men running against one another for governor of Utah ran commercials they filmed together. They went viral precisely because they represented a kind of decency that is too seldom seen but which many of us long for. The candidates were Utah Lt. Governor Spencer Cox and law school professor, Chris Peterson.

[\[Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTnS69MsVws\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTnS69MsVws)

That! More of that! Disagree but treat one another with kindness and respect.

Do you know how the Christian tradition has defined a saint? One who has been perfected in love, so that they love God with all they are, and love their neighbor as they love themselves.

For our children, for our communities, for our country—let's love our enemies, and do unto others with whom we disagree as we would have them do unto us. Let's go out of our way to show kindness. This is a very specific invitation—show kindness in this election year to those you know hold opposite political views than you. Bless them, encourage them, and if their candidate loses, particularly show tenderness and understanding to them. And perhaps together we as Christians might give a gift to our nation and our world. We can make a difference, as we do unto others