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Polite Conversations: Politics

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Matthew 20:17-28

We're spending three weeks right now on topics that we're not supposed to talk about at dinner parties – money, politics and religion, but we're not at a dinner party, are we? We're in church, and in all places where we ought to be able to have conversations about things that really matter in our every-day lives, it ought to be church. Now, I invite you to do your own thinking. I know you're going to do that anyway, but I'm inviting you to do your own thinking in these three areas and always based on scripture, tradition and experience. We're celebrating all the things we have in common with one another, which far outnumber the things we hold in differences. We're celebrating those things we have in common and leveraging them as a launching pad into all kinds of loving and courageous conversations. All of this, or course, in is preparation for the final exam of polite conversations – Thanksgiving Dinner.

So, we know that we're in uncharted territory when the Girl Scouts are suing the Boy Scouts, when an all-American couple is accused of conspiring with a homeless man to solicit charity, when research reports that the largest cut of Americans are termed the "exhausted majority" and when studies show that we identify more by political party than by race, ethnicity or religion - but we know there's hope. We know there's hope when the first thing a 300 million dollar lottery winner does is set up a charitable foundation. We know there's hope when empirical data shows that the deepest global poverty has been cut in half in the last twenty years. We know there's hope when even out of exhaustion we witness the largest mid-term election voter turnout in more than 100 years, and we know there's hope when a church in Wayzata, Minnesota, has, in its pews both red and blue hymnals. (Congregation laughs.) I thought that was pretty significant.

So, in the midst of all this, let's be sure to not take ourselves too seriously – right? Let's take on these important issues, but let's hold them lightly and generously and graciously, knowing that none of us is going to get it right, none of us is going to get it complete, none of us is going to get it perfect. So, let's hold it lightly. I think what we're going to hear today in the scripture is a time when some of Jesus' disciples were taking themselves too seriously, and we see the result of it in Jesus' response to them. So, let's give a listen, now, and attention to Matthew's Gospel.

(Rustin reads Matthew 20:17-28.)

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, by the moving of your Spirit, swell the strains of our shared song by touching the better angels of our nature. Amen.

Each week, before we jump into the topic at hand, I'm going to try to give you a tip or a tool, probably in most cases just a reminder of things that are important to good, high-quality communication among us and between us. Last week, I talked about the importance of listening loudly and what that means. Today, here's my tip: Put down the smart phone and pick up a pen. There it is: Put down the smart phone and pick up a pen. Let me unpack that a little for you briefly. Stop using electronic means for communication of emotional content. Whether it's Facebook or Twitter, cable news, podcasts or

webcasts, just put it down. And if you don't own a smart phone, you have no idea how to text or Twitter, consider yourself lucky. It's hard to believe it's only been ten years since the smart phone came out, a little bit more than ten years. We all walk around with a massive computer in our pockets. The impact on our daily lives is evidence that the long term consequences are not yet perfectly clear, whether taking information in or passing it along, including our own thoughts and feelings. We would be well-served to be more discerning in our use of electronic communication. The only joke, "I read it on the internet. So, it must be true" really isn't that funny anymore. The destructive nature of fake news and its very existence erodes our vital relation with reality.

Texts and emails should never contain emotional content. Those feelings are best expressed in person or in writing where you can own those words. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram should be reserved for pictures of puppies, bragging about your grandchildren and the funny video of the kid falling asleep in his cereal. Lest I sound like a troglodyte, let me just suggest that we give one another the respect and honor that we deserve, putting down the smart phone, shutting off the tablet, closing the lap top, turning off the cable news, speaking face to face whenever possible. Pick up a pen, grab a piece of paper and own the world that is created by your words. Can I get an "amen" from the brother in the front row?

Okay. That's the tip of the week. Put down the smart phone and pick up the pen. Now, unto a much simpler topic – politics. Now, our polite conversation this week is about politics, specifically in the lives who follow Jesus, and if the prospect of this topic makes you uneasy, and you are afraid of what I'm going to say, imagine how my dad is feeling right now, sitting over here in his visit for Thanksgiving. So, just to be clear, by politics, let me say what I'm talking about. I'm talking about American politics for a few minutes. I'm talking about politics from the Greek word that means "affairs of the city," the achieving and exercising the positions in governing a defined group of people by agreeable means. By its very nature politics is about power, about the ability to influence, sway and move the masses in a particular direction. It's complex and complicated enough that you can earn a four-year degree and even a PhD in all of what politics involves. So, for the purposes of this message let me state my intentions very directly. Will I be political? Yes. Partisan? No. Christian? Absolutely and always as best I understand what that means revealed to me in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Okay?

Now, the separation of Church and state is one of those essential issues we need to hit upfront, right? Separation of Church and state. I think it's one of those things we can all agree upon. That's absolutely essential. That's necessary, but the separation of Church and state does not mean the separation of Jesus from our politics. The separation of Church and state does not include the separation of our faith from the public arena. In fact, the notion that the affairs of the cities don't belong in church I think is avoidance. I might even say it's antithetical to what Jesus was all about. As Christians, as followers of Jesus, it's important to understand the political and religious context of his time. The Hebrew people, one of which he was, were angry and resentful of the occupying Roman forces. The varying responses to the Roman government created factions and sects each with their own strategy and approach. The Sadducees sold out to the Romans. The Pharisees took a pious, judgmental approach focused on morality. The Essenes ran away, retreating into the woods where spiritual practices would set them right. The Zealots used violence to express their views, seeking to take control even if it meant a holy war. Jesus came into this kind of religious and political context with a totally different message from the

rest of them. He didn't align with any of those established groups. In fact he offended and frustrated just about every single one of them, and to be sure, their differences were not only religious. They were highly political.

Now, fast forward two thousand years. We are now the current stewards of the way of Jesus, and we need a strategy, and we need an approach, both individually and collectively. We, too, are in communion with others in small subgroups, like this church, and in larger subgroups, like denominations. We, too, are in a complex and complicated external environment. Out of that context, I want to frame my remarks in just two specific places where we need to discern our politics. The first place is in our personal and private lives, in our individual personal and private lives, and, secondly, in our collective and communal lives together. Taking them in that order, personal and private lives.

I want to congratulate the fourth graders. Where are you? Raise your hands real quick. Fourth graders are still in the house. Yup. You got your new Bible. You're thumbing through it. You're in Matthew 20? Yeah. I like it. What you have in your hands, kids, is one of the most dangerous books in the world, and by that I mean, as we talked about in class, it's powerful. It teaches us so many things about who we are and what God would have us do and who God would have us be. I was able to teach one of the classes and being in the early one, we learned right away that the Bible is complex and it's complicated, and it comes with a tremendous amount of responsibility. It's complex and it's complicated because right there in the very first two chapters of the Bible. You're not three pages into the Bible when you see two different views of the same story. You know this. In Genesis One and Genesis Two there are two versions of creation. Genesis 1 is that poetic, almost liturgically credo, seven day account that concludes with the creation of human kind, human kind created simultaneously male and female, and the image of God, Imago Dei, and God called it "good." Genesis 2. This is the narrative that has a man created from dust and then the new and improved model of man created from his rib, and in this version we fall very quickly from grace, consumed with selfish greediness. We're not like God, but we want to be God.

In his 1965 book, *Lonely Man of Faith*, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggests that both of these Adams, Adam 1 and Adam 2, both of them reside in every single one of us, that all of us have both of these forms of Adam, the better Adam and the lesser Adam inside of us and capacity to embody either one. Adam 1, in God's image, embodies love and truth and compassion and genuine concern for other people. Adam 2, consumed with self-concern, ambition and jealousy, this separation from God is the result, all in scripture. David Brooks pick up on this same theme. Just a couple of years ago, in his terrific book *The Road to Character*, he talks of Adam 1, the motto being charity, love and redemption. Developing Adam 1 is to cultivate character in relationships. Adam 2, the motto being conquest, greatness and success. Developing Adam 2 is to cultivate strength over others. Asking which of the Adams prevails in you is a pretty good place to begin your personal and private discernment. To go deep into the core of ourselves and ask questions of integrity, character and truth. To be able to measure the degree to which our choices reflect Adam 1 in God's image, with charity and love toward all or Adam 2 that seeks self-preservation, conquest and success at all costs.

David Brooks is also the one who points to the differences between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are those skills that you list on your resume, that you bring to your job, that contribute to external successes, but the eulogy virtues are deeper, the ones spoken of at your funeral, the core of

your being about kindness, courage, truthfulness, faithfulness. Personal and private discernment leads eventually to the question of integrity, and the best definition of integrity that I've ever heard is being the same person all of the time, no matter who's watching or who's not watching. High bar. I know it, but that's where we're at, whether we're in the sanctuary or in the voting booth.

So, we begin with personal and private discernment, and then eventually it has to spill out into collective and communal discernment together. We have to ask ourselves as Christians and as a church what is our approach. What is our strategy? What is our voice in the public arena? Now, one of the options is in our passage for today, and it's also reflected in a very successful campaign slogan, MAGA. "Make American Great Again" was a very successful campaign slogan as evidenced by President Trump's victory. Interestingly, whether you voted for him or not, the idea of repeating greatness is appealing to all of us. Let's be honest, but there are two fundamental problems with this strategy as followers of Jesus. First, greatness was never, in and of itself, our primary goal. Jesus spoke straight to the issue of greatness time and again in the Gospels, and his walk always matched his talk. In today's passage there's a funny thing happening.

I hope you were really listening as Rustin read it out, but Jesus and the disciples are marching off to Jerusalem, and in no uncertain terms Jesus tells them what is waiting for them there. It's flogging. It's torture, and it's death, and, then, unique to Matthew's Gospel, it's the mother of James and John who come to Jesus, and this is one of those times I'd kind of like to be in the back stage of scripture – right? – when you could see the full humanity of it. These guys are so clueless that they totally missed what Jesus has just told them about what's to come and what it might lead to, and then they decide to make a power grab – right? Did you hear it? They say, "Hey, let's ask Jesus if we can be his right hand man and his left hand man. Let's go find out if we can be his Vice President and his Attorney General." – right? And then one of them says, "I got a better idea. Let's send Mom."

Well, Jesus wasn't having any of it. He had no patience for it. He said, "You have no idea what you are asking. Can you drink this cup from which I drink?" And they say, "Yes, we can," but Jesus shuts them down anyway and says, "It's not my call." Now, the account goes on. The other disciples hear about James and John making this power move, and they're chapped. Jesus sees all this spinning and all this talk about power and greatness, and he's going to use it as a teachable moment. He says, "Look, you knuckleheads." (That's in my translation.) He says, "Look, do you see those Roman rulers, how they hold their power over the people and how the great ones lord it over them? That's not how it works for us." He says, "Whoever wants to be great must be a servant. I did not come to be served but to serve." We have the same call. First, it was never about being great. That's the lesser Adam. It's about serving others – the better Adam.

The second problem with MAGA, with Making America Great Again, regardless of who you voted for, by the way. Let me be really clear about that. No matter what your strategy and approach is, this one failed us as Christians for a second reason – because it implies a specific history and a specific past when it says great "again." But when? Whose history? What past? And, more importantly, was it really as great as we think it was? Well, that will depend on when you're talking about, who you're talking about and which past. Look, we've had some great chapters in our nation's history, don't miss hear me, but we've also, for sure, had some epic failures. If you truly want to be inspired by the past of our great

nation, get back to Washington, DC, as soon as you can, and if you get a chance go with some teenagers. Read what people have chosen to carve into stone about these people out of our past. Go and read the words that have been chosen and etched into marble in these amazing memorial places.

Around the dome of Jefferson, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

On the fairly new façade of FDR's memorial, "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those that have much. It is whether we provide enough for those who have too little." In stone!

Still echoing in the air but inscribed on MLK. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

I happen to think that character matters in this whole venture of politics.

And at the feet of a seated Abraham Lincoln, the closing words of his first inaugural will be my closing words of this morning. "We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be by the better nature, by the better angels of our nature."

Friends, whether it's personal and private discernment or collective and communal discernment, it's all to embrace the idea that the end of our worship is the beginning of our service and that what the Lord requires of us has always been and will forever be to do justice to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God.

May it be so in us. Amen.