

Where is Christ in our culture wars?

Second sermon in series: Being a red-letter Christian in a black and white world

Preached Sunday, May 25, 2008

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Text: John 8:2-11

Theme: How do we as Christians respond to the polarized politics created by culture wars that have been going on for four decades? How can we be a transforming presence?

Jim Wallis tells a humorous joke about two senators – one a Republican and the other a Democrat – who were eating together in the Senate Dining Room. The Republican senator said, “You Democrats know nothing about religion. You are so caught up in being politically correct you don’t know anything about being religiously correct.”

“That’s not true,” insisted the Democratic senator, “We know a lot about religion.”

So the Republican senator issued a challenge, “I’ll bet you twenty dollars that you can’t recite the Lord’s Prayer!” The Democrat said that was easy and began, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep...” The Republican then reached into his wallet and replied, “Darn, I didn’t think you could do it.”

Perhaps, yes perhaps the differences between the two parties are not that big.

Today I am going to try to answer the question “Where is Christ in our culture wars?” or to be more personal “How can you and I be more Christ-like in a culture that is becoming more and more polarized?” This is the second sermon in the series “Being a red-letter Christian in a black and white world” and if you remember last week I used the example of a high contrast picture to illustrate how hard it is to have meaningful and graceful conversations over complex issues when those issues are reduced to simplistic black versus white positions. Without the middle tones or the addition of color we were left to guess at what the picture was about and to form opinions devoid of good information. Unfortunately what we saw in that illustration is too often true with how many of our moral, ethical, and political decisions are made today.

In his book *“The Great Awakening,”* Jim Wallis writes, “Our political context has become a bitter partisan wasteland, bereft of real solutions. Most people that I talk to are extremely weary of the kind of politics now practiced (by both sides) in Washington, D.C. Attacking the other side, exaggerating our differences, never listening to the concerns of political opponents, and, finally, winning power by any means necessary are all current practices that prevent us from finding answers to our most vexing problems. While the contest for power has always been a Washington staple, in past years many politicians at least talked to one another, even liked one another, and sometimes cooperated on important issues. That seems mostly lost now, and the political and media veterans in the nation’s capital agree that things have gotten much worse. For too long we have been captive to a politics of blame and fear, while America is eager for a politics of solutions and hope.”¹

This politics of blame and fear actually is not new for most of us sitting in this room. It has been building since the 1960s and was finally given the name “culture war” in 1992 by Patrick Buchanan who was running for the Republican nomination for president. When he didn’t get the nod he was able to deliver a major address at the Republican National Convention in which he said, “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.”² It was a war that had been waged for more than 14 years and had its roots in the magnificent and mysterious Sixties.

How many here remember the Sixties? There is a cute saying that if you remember the sixties you probably didn't experience them. Historians say there has been no other period in modern history as turbulent, volatile, and as powerfully transforming as the Sixties. Not only did the events of the 60s and early 70s change an entire generation of people known as the "baby boomers" but it continues to color the way we look at government, authority, families, and cultural rules today.

It is hard to imagine the amount of change that we witnessed in such a compressed time unless you recall images and events. I remember fondly bell bottom pants, rainbow tie dyed shirts, psychedelic patterned ponchos, 4-inch wide paisley ties, Nehru jackets, love beads, going from a crew cut to no cut at all, and my best friend's gigantic afro. I remember events like Alan Shepherd and John Glenn orbiting the earth and Neil Armstrong taking his first steps on the moon. I remember the Liverpool invasion of the Beatles, followed by the Stones, the Doors, the Grateful Dead, the Who, and the Mamas and the Papas. I remember Woodstock, the Summer of Love in San Francisco, Timothy Leary and his cannabis, psychedelic drug, LSD, notion of spirituality.

I remember some of the greatest speakers I have ever heard. President John Kennedy speaking his famous words at his inauguration, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." Or the great words of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in his speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial, "I have a dream..." I also remember the dark days when we learned that these great men and others were assassinated.

I remember leaving my "Ozzie and Harriet" home in 1968 to go to college and never finding that home again. Colleges back then were places of protest and dissent and I remember listening intently to the voices of Daniel Ellsberg, Daniel Berrigan, Thomas Hayden, and Maggie Kuhn (the leader of the Gray Panthers) and I learned to question authority. The words of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" changed my ideas about the environment, the words of Stokely Carmichael and James Cone (one of my professors in Black Theology) and a personal conversation I had with Shirley Chisholm changed by understanding of race and white privilege, and a conversation I had with Ralph Nader changed my ideas about corporate greed.

Several of my friends went to Vietnam and died fighting a war that was probably more unpopular than the present war. I remember the impact of the Kent State massacre and how I led a demonstration that next day on my campus and was arrested. It was a turbulent time. As we moved from the late 60s into the early 70s it seemed that all of culture was experiencing a crazy, out-of-control crescendo. The protests became more violent, the birth control pill was introduced fueling an even bigger sexual revolution, drugs were everywhere, God was declared dead, women were burning their bras and declaring their liberation, and the divorce rate spiked nearly 40%.

The final straw came on January 22, 1973 with a decision that some people call the long-awaited end of the liberal pendulum swing. On that day the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision regarding abortion. *Roe v. Wade* declared that a woman had the constitutional right to an abortion for any or all reasons in the first two trimesters of pregnancy, and in the third trimester it allowed states to protect the child unless the woman's life was in danger. This decision was served as a lightning rod for all those who had been a part of what Nixon and Agnew had called the "Silent Majority." They could not be silent any longer.

Led by Rev. Jerry Falwell a new group emerged – the Moral Majority. He started building support around the issue of abortion but then as the group grew with other conservatives like Pat Robertson and James Dobson with his Focus on Family coalition; they added hot-button issues like family values, homosexuality, the sanctity of marriage, gun control, stem cell research, death penalty, and privacy issues. As strongly as the 60s pushed its liberal agenda the Moral Majority and the new Religious Right

countered in the 70s and 80s and pushed a conservative agenda that won a number of political battles but lost the heart of many Christians.

I believe that Newton's Third Law of Motion applies to our culture as well as to physics. The law states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If you have ever seen a Newton's cradle then you will know that when you swing one ball from one end the one ball pops out in an equal and opposite manner. What is true with those steel ball bearings is also true in culture. When you swing to the left in history there always seems to be an equal and opposite swing back to the right and it seems to keep going forever. I feel sorry for the people, like you and me, who are caught in the middle getting bruised and battered by the forces around us.

So how do we act like Christ when we are in the middle? How do we serve our Lord more faithfully when we are caught in the bruising middle ground of a culture war?

Adam Hamilton, a United Methodist pastor at the Church of the Resurrection, says there are four options for how a Christian might engage with a non-Christian culture. First we can be like the Amish, Mennonites, and other more monastic groups and simply withdraw. I don't know about you but I find this one hard. I am too connected to culture to pull completely away and I don't see the purpose in doing so. If I look to our Lord for direction I realize that he only pulled away from culture long enough to pray and renew and then he came back and fully engaged so that he could transform it. So for me, this one is off the table.

The second option is accommodation or that we (and/or the Church) start to look like the culture we are trying to change. The Church has wrestled with this problem since its very inception. Paul warns the good folk in Rome, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good, and acceptable, and perfect."³ And yet if we were honest every church has conformed to culture. We change our music to adjust to the tastes of each emerging generation. We add new sound systems and video projections to stay current and we have put in indoor plumbing and lighting. I don't think many of us are too disturbed by the changes we have made but that is not the accommodation that Hamilton is talking about. He is talking about changing our values to resemble culture's. When that happens we are like salt that has lost its flavor and is no longer of value.

The third option is to wage war against culture. I personally have a difficult time with this option and bristle when I see the likes of Fred Phelps and his cronies carrying pickets that demean gays and lesbians. I don't understand someone who will blow up an abortion clinic and perhaps kill the staff in the name of the Lord of love. Christ did get angry but his anger was directed at the spiritual leadership of the day that were more interested burdening their flocks with more rules than journeying with them in grace.

The fourth option is the most powerful. It is to become a contagious witness through sacrificial love. We don't give up our values. We don't compromise or accommodate culture. We don't go postal against others who don't share our same point of view. Instead we live in such a way that we create an alternative community – the church – where we live out relationships shaped by our crucified Lord. In that alternative community we practice living Sermon on the Mount/Red-letter values and we are changed and that change bubbles over and changes our community.

In this age of political correctness it might not feel proper to pair the words sacrifice and love in the same sentence. But the two are as inseparable for us today as they were for our Lord two thousand years ago. Sacrifice congers up all sorts of upsetting and off-putting images but it really means that we put the best of who we are, the best of what we do, the best of our hopes and dreams on the altar of our Lord and say, "Receive my offering and use it to your glory."

Because of the love that was first offered to us by our Lord on that cross years ago we offer our love to the least, the lost, and the marginalized. We sacrifice our egos and pride and become humble servants putting the needs of others above our own. We crucify our agendas and self centeredness and become channels of grace through which God's love might flow and heal. We surrender our need to prove that we are right, to stay in control, and to win every argument even if it means causing great divisions and we abide in Christ's love.

In that love we seek forgiveness rather than retaliation and retribution. In that love we make every decision with the poor in mind. In that love we are more concerned about serving others than about getting our due. In that love we listen.

Let me stop here because I believe that one of the best ways to bring peace to the culture wars is to simply listen to each other. We listen – not with the intent to debate or rebut – but listen with the intent to understand. James, the brother of Jesus, said it so well, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”⁴

I have seen this work in even the most contentious of situations. As many of you know I have offered my services as a healer by going to churches that are broken apart on the issue of homosexuality. I go in and use what I call a talking paper, which should actually be called a listening paper, and the people share their opinions about the issue and LISTEN to each other with the intent to understand and appreciate. I have done this dozens of times now and every time there is healing. Every time the polarized camps find a way back to the middle.

One of the issues that is slowly surfacing in this year's presidential campaign is whether it is proper to open talks with our enemies. This is not a political issue as much as it is a moral and spiritual issue. If we are to quit making enemies, if we are to stop building camps of hate, if we are to ever move forward in this world we need to listen to all people and begin a dialogue of understanding.

We as Christians and we the Church need to offer the world a new model of living – a model of genuine love and humble sacrifice. It is the most transforming gift we can offer.

Let me end with a story that continues to be one of my favorite because it shows this kind of sacrificial love in action. The story is familiar to most of us and is the story of the woman caught in adultery. The leaders of one of the Jewish “political” parties of the day, the Pharisees seize the opportunity of this woman caught in adultery to try to trap Jesus. These enforcers of rules know that this woman should be judged by their rules and stoned. There is more interest in the rules than in grace. There is more desire to trap Jesus than to forgive and help the woman in a tough spot in her life.

So they come to the Temple where Jesus is speaking and make their case and Jesus kneels and starts writing in the dust on the stone floor. For years I missed the symbolism of this moment until it was brought to my attention by another pastor. Our story of faith tells us that God wrote the Ten Commandments with his finger in the two stone tablets. Now we see the enfleshed God once again writing with his finger on the stones of the temple.

Jesus is not erasing what his Father has already written. Jesus has already spoken out against adultery and if you remember the Sermon on the Mount he actually raised the bar and told people that they should not even lust after another person. I believe that as he is writing in the dust he is simply reminding every Pharisee in the room of the laws they have broken and continue to break. Then he says, “Let the person without sin cast the first stone.” Can't you just hear the sound of stones falling to the floor? This is the sound of justice. This is the sound of the Kingdom breaking through. This is the sound of grace prevailing!

When the last stone has fallen, Jesus turns to the woman and says, “Woman where are your accusers?” There were none. So he said, “Neither do I accuse you, but go and sin no more.” Adultery was still very much a sin but he listened to her, he felt her heart and pain, he had compassion for her, and he allowed her to begin life again under his banner of grace. He changed the dialogue that day from the cultural black/white, winner /loser, sinner/judge encampments. He offered an alternative vision of love and sacrifice.

If we are to try to be like Christ in a world divided by fear, anger, hate, prejudice, ignorance, greed, power, and politics then we need to present an alternative message of love and sacrifice. We need to wage forgiveness, mercy, compassion, hospitality, and grace.

Let us be in prayer...

¹ Wallis, Jim. *“The Great Awakening,”* HarperCollins Kindle Edition, Location 557

² <http://www.buchanan.org/pa-92-0817-rnc.html>

³ Romans 12:2

⁴ James 1:19