

# **Living a Life of Love in a Politically Charged Culture**

**Sermons for Discussion**

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This sermon, preached just before the national election of 2016 between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, seeks to provide a Biblical perspective on the role of government and to offer thoughts on how we as Christians might approach a controversial election.

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**Puzzled by Politics**  
**Joshua 5.13-15**  
November 2016

Well, here we are, at the end of more than 600 wearying days of campaigning, and just two days from the election. Where do we find ourselves? Not in such a good place, actually.

We find ourselves:

- full of fatigue and weariness over the whole thing – “Deliver us from the Election,” shouts the front page of the Journal and Courier this morning
- with only two electable candidates, one of whom is described as pompous, immoral, self-centered, and lacking self-control, and the other who is described as calculating, crooked, self-serving, and lacking integrity
- with a political candidate selection process that is so broken it effectively weeds out the best candidates and has served up these two as the only individuals between whom we can choose
- with our nation more divided along lines of party and ideology than it has been in the lifetime of most of us, and with each party’s platform amounting more and more to simply undoing whatever those other guys did for the previous four years
- with candidate attacks upon one another reaching an all-time low, setting a tone of incivility for the nation, normalizing unkindness, and reinforcing an increasingly entrenched us-versus-them divide
- and, as a result, with most of us finding our hearts filled with concern and even fear as we contemplate life for our nation beginning at noon on January 20

You’ve seen the survey results:

1. There are unprecedented negative ratings for both candidates  
Both are strongly disliked at historic levels, more than fifty percent for Donald Trump, and more than 1 out of 3 for Hillary Clinton
2. The majority of voters doubt the honesty and trustworthiness of both candidates  
Two out of three view the other candidate as dishonest and untrustworthy, but more than twenty percent see their own candidate in the same terms
3. The majority of voters say they will feel scared if the person they are voting for doesn’t win, and, in fact, that is the primary consideration shaping the votes of many

3 out of 10 who plan to vote for Hillary Clinton say they are doing so primarily as a vote against Donald Trump, and four out of 10 said the same about why they are voting for Donald Trump, that it will be primarily a vote against Hillary Clinton.

4. Younger voters are registering deep disappointment with both candidates and disillusionment with the whole political process

One out of four (26%) millennials said they would rather have a random citizen of the US chosen president by lottery than have either of the two candidates serve as President, and the more tongue and cheek, but nonetheless telling, statistic that almost the same number (23%) said they would rather have a giant meteor destroy the earth than have either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton in the White House.

Regardless of who wins, I think it is safe to say virtually all of us will wake up on Wednesday with a deep sense of relief to be done with the shenanigans and a deep sense of concern about what happens next.

You may have seen the recent *Pearls Before Swine* comic strip:

Pig walks up to Rat, who is sitting behind a desk with a sign that says, "Hope for your Future \$5, Pig says, "I'll take some hope." Rat says, "Sorry, all out. Can I interest you in some dread?"

But despair isn't an option. As Richard John Neuhaus put it, Christians "have not the right to despair, for despair is sin. And we have not the reason to despair, quite simply because Christ is risen."

So how about some perspective and some hope ? I want to invite you to turn with me to a passage of Scripture that isn't about politics or elections or the United States, but which nonetheless has an important perspective to offer us in these turbulent and weary pre-election days in which we find ourselves.

The events in this passage take place right after the nation of Israel has crossed into the promised land, but before its first confrontation with the Canaanites who inhabit the land, and whose morals and beliefs, with their child sacrifices and temple prostitution, are so immoral and dishonoring to God.

Joshua 5.13-15

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, 'Are you for us or for our enemies?' 'Neither,' he replied, 'but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.' Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, 'What message does my Lord have for his servant?' The commander of the Lord's army replied, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.' And Joshua did.

Here are three things I'd like us to notice in this text:

### **1. Notice the natural human propensity to divide ourselves into us and them**

How did Joshua see this person standing before him? Not on the basis of what they had in common as fellow human beings, but through the lens of the cultural divisions in the world around him, in this case, divisions of Canaanite versus Israelite

Our natural tendency is to divide and band together (see Jonathan Haidt *Righteous Mind*)

To join together with those who are like us, to pull away from those who are unlike us, and then to see each other through the lens of differences and distinctions as being superior to those others

So we quickly categorize each other. What are you? Whose side are you on? Are you with me or against me? We divide up into opposing groups:

Republican or Democrat  
Liberal or Conservative  
American or foreign  
White or a person of color  
Male or female  
Us versus you

### **2. Notice God's unwillingness to see humanity in the same way**

His answer, translated "Neither," is literally in the Hebrew: "no"

When he looks at the world, he doesn't see Israelites and Canaanites, or Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives.

"As the commander of the Army of the Lord I have now come."

God sees the world as divided between those who acknowledge his command, his kingship, his rule, and those who don't

You've often heard me quote the CS Lewis line: "In the end there are two kinds of people in this world, those who say to God, "Thy will be done," or those to whom God says, "Thy will be done."

There are only those who recognize God's claims and bow to him, and those who don't.

Paul describes how his own view of humanity, even in the cauldron of the ancient world with its many divisions and subdivisions, gained a whole new perspective after he came to Christ, and began to see the world in the same way God did. No, he says too.

II Corinthians 5.15

Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.

Galatians 3.28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus if you belong to Christ.

God says, "There is only one fault line that divides person from person, and that is your view of me. I am the commander. Do you concede that or not?"

### **3. Notice God is not just present. He rules; He has come to take charge.**

And: he is in charge *now*/ I *am* the Commander, he says to Joshua - not I will be, once the land is fully captured, not once all of the Canaanites are tossed out or reformed, not once my people get their act together and begin to live lives that please me, but now, even when the land is in upheaval morally and spiritually and my people are as well

And today, when the same can be said of the cultural upheaval in our society, he says to us too, I rule now, I am in charge now

That raises two questions, I think:

First, in what way can we understand God to be in charge, when we have human government, which may or may not be consistent with God's divine government?

Here are a few reflections on government from the perspective of Scripture:

#### ***a. The Scriptures teach that government is given as a gift by God for our benefit and to fulfill God's purposes***

Romans 13.1-7

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. **The authorities that exist have been established by God.** . . . Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for **the authorities are God's servants**, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenues, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

#### ***b. Government is a gift from God regardless of how it is structured***

We here in the United States live in what is called a federal republic.

In his book *The American Hour*, Os Guinness put his finger on the three irreducible distinctives of American society, without any one of which we seriously compromise the whole American experiment:

- politically we embrace democracy, which is rooted in ancient Greek philosophy
- economically we embrace capitalism, which was first developed in Europe during the Middle Ages
- morally we embrace the Judeo-Christian moral framework - in other words, the ethics of the Bible - as the foundation for our laws while still affirming freedom of religion

And it was modern enlightenment thought that brought these three together into a federal republic.

Give our commitment to a biblical underpinning, it is easy to see how our government is a gift from God – but government is a gift from God regardless of how it is structured.

Remember Paul could write this about the Roman government that ruled over Israel as an occupying force and that was led by an Emperor who gained the throne through consolidating power

***c. There are limits to what human government and human leaders are able to accomplish***

Listen to these two familiar verses.

Psalm 118.6-9

The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.  
What can man do to me.  
The Lord is with me; he is my helper.  
I will look in triumph on my enemies.  
It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.  
It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

Isaiah 9.6, speaking of the coming Messiah  
The government shall be upon *his* shoulders.

John Stonestreet from the Colson Center says:

Our deepest problems are not political, and so no politician or election is the solution for our deepest problems.

This means not looking to our government to provide what it was never designed to deliver or capable of providing: hope, peace, joy, satisfaction, happiness.

“We cast our votes. But if we cast our confidence into our candidates, woe be unto us,” wrote Beth Moore in her blog “The Scandal of Election 2016.”

***d. And all human government is under God’s sway***

Government is under God’s ultimate control

Daniel 2.20-23

Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;  
wisdom and power are his.  
He changes times and seasons;  
he sets up kings and deposes them.  
He gives wisdom to the wise  
and knowledge to the discerning.  
He reveals deep thing and hidden things;  
he knows what lies in darkness,  
and light dwells with him.  
I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers.

That leads to the second question: in what way can we understand God to be in charge when things in this world go in ways that seem counter to God’s will, and when leaders in our government, walk contrary to God and his ways, and when it feels like things are going the wrong direction for our country?

Psalms 11.3-4

When the foundations are being destroyed,  
what can the righteous do? (“the righteous” in this context means believers)  
The Lord is in his holy temple;  
the Lord is on his holy throne.

The Christian faith has always upheld the crucial distinction between what God *causes*, as the direct expression and outworking of his will, and what God *allows*, which may be contradictory to his revealed will but which nonetheless serves his redemptive purposes in ways we may not expect or even see

Cyrus in the Old Testament is a perfect expression of this contradiction.

There are some people who anticipate dire results if one or the other candidate is elected – a crash of the stock market, ramped up aggression by ISIS, a reshuffling of the world order, a decline of American influence or respect abroad

Why might God allow – not cause, but allow – a candidate to come to the Oval Office who contributed to the destabilizing of the country and the world in one of these ways?

The answer is that there are things that matter more to God than our life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.



God's greatest concern is with his rule over each human heart - Bringing individuals into a relationship with Jesus as king, and equipping them to live as a citizen of his kingdom

God's desire is for each person on this planet to recognize him as the commander and bow to him in worship and service. The kingdom of God is wherever Jesus rules as king in the hearts of men, women and children as they put their faith in him as savior, and their confidence in him as their king.

So God can use the insecurity and instability that arises because a new leader shakes national and world confidence which leads to new world alliances, or a market downturn or the threat of enemy attack – God can allow those things, just as he has allowed the oppression of faith in China, for example, or the poverty of many in Sub-Saharan Africa, as a way of turning people to himself.

While government is God's gift, government is not God's answer to all human ills - God is, and only God is. And he wants us to know this.

So God could allow a devastating outcome not only to expose a need for reform of our nation's political processes but, far more deeply, to turn people's eyes to God.

Whenever we come to a human limitation – in ourselves, in our leaders, in our institutions – it forces us to consider the limitless resources and sufficiency of God.

It may move those who don't know God to look to him for the first time, and those who do to look to him more deeply.

In all things, as we sang at the start of the service, whether in times of prosperity or in times of darkness, we can bless God, because God comes and offers us himself – himself, the ultimate end of all human existence.

God is willing for us to endure much in order that we might turn our hearts to him and receive his very self in exchange.

So God is ruler *now*, even when things seem contrary to his will, even when things seem out of his control.

#### **4. Notice also, God's place as ruler is *among* us.**

"I have now come," he says.

There are multiple visitations of God with humanity in the Old Testament: the Angel of the Lord who turns out to be God himself.

The same dawning realization happens as we here – receives worship, take off sandals,

These divine visitations find their ultimate expression in the incarnation.

Jesus became flesh and pitched his tent in our midst: Lived among us, died for us, rose again to be with us and to rule over us as king.

His last words in Matthew echo God's words to Joshua here:

"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"

#### **4. Notice our right response before God**

**a. worship** – Joshua fell face down in reverence

Giving God his proper place in our lives

Our right place is to honor his right place over us

To put God in his right place is to look to him and not to others to be for us all we need

To give him greater weight than we give anything or anyone else in our lives

**b. obedience** – What message does my Lord have for his servant?

It is God's right place of rule over us as commander and king

What is right, what is good, what is necessary, is his to declare

All of us, leaders included, are called to put him first, to live a life submitted to his rule.

All of us, leaders included, are answerable for the choices we make and the life we live.

All of us are called to submit every part of our lives to his rule

Ecclesiastes 12.12: When all is said and done, the conclusion of the matter is this – fear God, honor him with your obedience – this is the whole duty of man

\* \* \*

In the light of these things, how should we view this upcoming election and its outcomes?

#### **How should we think about how we approach our vote?**

This is a unique challenge this year – we are voting in a different circumstance.

My own wrestling with the hopes that it may be helpful for you.

Several have asked how I am approaching voting

I've asked folks if that would be helpful to share and several have said yes

The goal isn't to tell you what to do

Nor is it for you to try to guess how I'm voting but to think with me as a follower of Christ about how to approach something like this

I don't claim to have it all figured out, and not trying to talk you into voting for a certain person

Implications of the things we've said:

If my responsibility is to join Joshua in a posture of worship and obedience before God, then *I have a responsibility to be obedient to my conscience*

Romans 13; it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

And as Paul will tell us again and again in I Corinthians 8-11, we have the responsibility to respect one another's conscience, which may lead us before God to do different things, just as it did the Corinthians

### **Four ways to vote according to our conscience**

**1. There are some who in good conscience vote for one of the two electable candidates on the basis of one particular issue, such as the right to life or religious liberty or care for the marginalized in our society, and they vote for the candidate who they think has the greatest likelihood of affecting the most good in that one area**

For them, this is the deciding factor, and whichever candidate offers the greater likelihood of affecting that issue for good is the one who receives the vote

You are probably aware that the President appoints all judges, and there is currently a vacancy on the Supreme Court. Whoever is appointed to that seat could determine the balance of votes on issues such as Roe vs Wade and the right to life, or other matters of religious liberty, making the selection of the next President important for those issues.

**2. There are some who in good conscience vote for one of the two electable candidates on the basis of which candidate they believe has the greatest likelihood of bringing about the most good in all areas**

In this case, the voter takes a wider view than a single issue, and also considers more widely the candidate's character, moral standards, and personal faith, as well as the candidate's party affiliation, their platform as a candidate, and their economic plan. This approach to voting also considers the scope of power to effect change that is actually available to the president

According to our constitution, our president has limited but real power. In addition to appointing justices, the person in the White House:

- Heads up all of the intelligence efforts of the country
- Handles all foreign affairs, and functions as the de facto leader of the Free World

- Commands the military, though with funding voted by Congress
- And signs bills, sends them back with suggested changes, or vetoes them, though that veto can be overturned

But their own positions are not always likely to shape the nation, given the power of other elected offices and of the justices

However, aspects of the president's power we don't think about as often

- contributing to spirit of division or unity, *pluribus* or *unum*?
- contributing to strengthening or undermining our confidence in our government
- contributing to a spirit of fear and mistrust of those unlike us or of courage and risk to reach toward those unlike us?
- contributing to a climate of grace and civility or judging and attacking

All these things taken and weighed together, and then a vote cast on the basis of conscience

You'll notice I'm not suggesting that simply identifying a candidate's political party is enough to settle the question of conscience for us

Political parties are built around our answers to a limited number of questions about the role of government and its relationship to individual freedoms and rights, and each articulates a limited set of moral priorities in that light

According to sociologist Christian Smith and Jonathan Haidt, each one has a different value that it holds most sacred:

- For Republicans, or social conservatives, their most sacred value is preserving the institutions and traditions that sustain a moral community
- For Democrats, or social liberals, their most sacred value: caring for victims of oppression that fall through the cracks of society

Wouldn't we as Christians want to preserve our moral footing as a nation *and* care for victims of oppression? Wouldn't we value both of these things?

While we may lean towards one party or the other as more consistently lining up with what Scripture teaches about rights and responsibilities and moral foundations, there are dimensions of both parties and their platforms that we should be able to point to as being consistent with God's revealed truth

As one example, I think that in general social conservatives do a better job of advocating for the value of human life before birth while social liberals tend to do a better job of advocating for the sanctity of that same life once the child is born

Another example is in the area of gun control, where I think that in general social conservatives do a better job of advocating for adequate armament for those in

the military or police force for the sake of increasing societal order, while social liberals do a better job of advocating for the voluntary limiting of access to firearms for ordinary citizens for the sake of decreasing societal violence

I think you can come up with other examples that have to do with hospitality for foreigners, etc.

So whether or not you can agree with those specific examples, I think as Christians we might be able to agree that voting along party lines *exclusively* may not be a luxury that we have

### **3. Third, there are some who in good conscience vote for a candidate who is not electable**

They do this either because in good conscience they cannot cast a vote for either electable candidate, and they seek to find a candidate they can wholly heartedly support, even if that candidate will never see the Oval Office

In addition to voting for a member of the Libertarian party, On the Indiana ballot there are fifteen possible write-in candidates, and you could vote for a candidate from the Green party, the Socialist party, the Worker's Party, the Constitution party, or America's Party

Or you could choose one of nine independents, including the owner of an exotic animal farm in Oklahoma, an economics prof from Boston University, a teacher from Michigan who registered under the nickname None of the Above, and the mayor of a Kentucky town with 587 residents.

Or they do this because, exasperated by our current political system that gives us candidates such as these, they cast a vote for political reform by writing in the name of a candidate they believe is genuinely qualified for the office, even if their vote will not be recorded

### **4. Finally, there are some who in good conscience will vote for one of the two electable candidates not on the basis of which candidate they believe will do the most good, but on the basis of which candidate they believe will cause the least damage during their years in office.**

This could be due to matters of character flaws, or to possible impact on the moral climate of the nation, or the economy, or our relationships with other nations.

Like it or not, the US is not only the greatest power on earth, but it is also the greatest stabilizing power on earth – monetarily, politically, morally, between religious groups. So many nations Strengthening or weakening the US, contributing to stability or instability

As someone has said, the president of the US is the head of the free world.  
Which candidate will have the less detrimental long term impact?

### **Weighing those together**

How will the country will be impacted by their leadership long term?

Which will cause the greater long term erosion?

Who has the potential to hand it on to the next president in the best shape, or with the least permanent damage?

### **Conclusion**

So, with two days to go, I encourage you to:

1. Have a conversation with someone else in the church family.

Not, who are you voting for? But, How are you approaching thinking about the vote?

Listen, hear their conscience, and honor their desire to please God

Reflect together with them on the limits of human government and the trustworthiness of divine government

2. Be gracious

The need is great, especially in this divided world, for us to continue to be a people of grace.

Take the high road, choose not to speak ill, choose to work together to move forward.

3. Pray

Entrust all things in the hands of the one who judges all things justly (1 Peter 2)

4. Trust

God is in control. That takes us back to verse with which we began the service:

Psalm 11.3-4

When the foundations are being destroyed,  
what can the righteous do?

The Lord is in his holy temple;  
the Lord is on his holy throne.

Would you pray with me?

*In Christ alone my hope is found  
this solid ground  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm  
What heights of love, what depths of peace  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease  
My Comforter, my All in All  
Here in the love of Christ I stand*

## How to Talk About Politics

James 1.19-20

March 2020

This morning I'm preaching on how to talk about politics.

Not so much how to *think* about politics – If you're interested you can find a sermon in our archives called *Puzzled by Politics* from 11/6/16 in which I focus more on how to think about politics from a Christian perspective

This message is more how to talk about politics. And specifically, appropriately enough given our focus on love this year, it is about how to love someone you are talking with about politics

We talked about this at our all-staff meeting this week. Brently suggested it could be a three word sermon: Change the subject.

For whatever reason, talking about politics seems to be one of the most emotionally charged and difficult things we can do, doesn't it?

I was thinking this week about some coyotes that we have had coming up into our ravine.

We sleep with our windows open, so we hear them at night, barking and howling, sometimes quite close. One morning we saw tracks in the snow right across our back yard.

Coyotes call for two reasons. They use whines, yelps, and howls to connect with others in their pack, and growls and barks and yelp howls to claim turf and to establish territory, drawing a line between them and their enemies

In other words, they are talking about politics all the time. It is what coyotes and people do naturally.

That brought me to thinking about two remarkably related but opposite pictures of human dealings in scripture.

The first is found in Jeremiah 5.6, describing how people act when they lose sight of God. You could call this The Wild Kingdom.

Therefore a lion from the forest will attack them,  
a wolf from the desert will ravage them,  
a leopard will lie in wait near their towns  
to tear to pieces any who venture out,



for their rebellion is great  
and their backslidings many.

That's who we are naturally – like coyotes and wolves that form into our own packs and then square off against other packs

The other passage is Isaiah 11.6, 9, is startlingly different, It's the Peaceable Kingdom.

<sup>6</sup> The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion will feed together;  
and a little child will lead them.

<sup>9</sup> They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.

That's who we are supernaturally – able to live in peace even with those who are very different from us

I vividly remember a painting called The Peaceable Kingdom on the wall in the guest room in my grandparent's house.

It was one of the sixty two versions that the Quaker ministry Edward Hicks painted of this passage, depicting animals with almost human eyes – wolf, lamb, leopard, calf – peacefully lying side by side in the foreground, with a little child playing in their midst, and in the background, William Penn and the Delaware Indians formalizing their peace treaty which was honored and faithfully kept by both sides for more than seventy years

Edward Hicks spent his whole life trying to capture this mysterious spiritual reality that in the kingdom of God we are changed people, with changed allegiance, and changed priorities, and as a result, rather than pulling back from each other into packs, we can move toward each other in love.

That brings me to the passage we'll be looking at this morning.

**James 1.19-20**

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

***My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this:***

Literally: Brothers and sisters dearly loved

Right off the bat we are reminded that two things are true in any conversation we have with any person

First, I begin this conversation as someone who is dearly loved. That means

***I am free to love you*** out of the overflow of God's love for me.

That means nothing is at stake for me in terms of my own personal wellbeing.

You can love me or not, agree with me or not, be kind to me or not.

I am the beloved of God, and that will not change.

***Not only am I free to love you - I am called to love you***

In John 13.34 Jesus calls us as his followers to a life of love, and in 13.35 he says that our love will be the thing that makes it clear to the world that we are his followers.

That means no matter what other reasons or circumstances may have led into this conversation, the primary reason you are in it is to love the person you are talking with.

And as we'll learn more about as we round the corner later this year and shift our focus from God's love for us to our love for others, the love we are called to is *agape* love.

That describes a love that puts you first, ahead of me, above me, even if it costs me.

Second, James reminds me that I begin this conversation with someone else who has great value in God's eyes

If you are a fellow human being, you bear the image of God.

And if you are a fellow follower of Christ, we have the same heavenly father, and you are my brother or sister.

Either way, you are someone of great value, and the conversation that is about to unfold should reflect that.

So . . . You are loved by God. You are about to enter into a conversation with someone else who is loved by God. And you are called to love that person with the love of God.

Which leads pretty naturally to the word of advice from James that follows.

### **James 1.19-20**

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires

***Everyone should be quick to listen,***

Here are four practical principles about being quick to listen.

#### ***A. Ask questions.***

The best way to love someone in a conversation about politics is to listen.

Actually, the best way to love someone in a conversation about anything is to listen.

And the best way to listen is to ask someone a question and then close your mouth and open your ears.

People love to share their opinions and perspectives. It is a way to communicate value to someone. So ask questions.

Remember that the best questions are open-ended.

That means they are not yes-or-no questions.

An example of a yes/no question: "Did you vote for President Trump?" or "Are you a Republican?"

And they are not leading questions, which are usually ways of giving your own opinion in the form of a question.

An example of a leading question: "You won't vote for President Trump, will you?" or "You *will* vote for President Trump, won't you?"

Instead, an open-ended question is one in which the person is given the freedom to take the conversation in whatever way they please.

An example: "Tell me some of the things that will shape how you vote for President this fall." Or "How have the last four years shaped your thinking about what the next four years should look like?"

You've asked a question. The other person has just taken a big risk to share an opinion. Right now the conversation is at a precarious place. Don't kill the conversation by jumping in with your opinion. Gently fan the conversation into flame by making it safe for the other person. Here's how.

## ***B. Check what you hear.***

I call it The George Herbert Principle.

Before he became a pastor my favorite poet George Herbert taught rhetoric at Cambridge University. Whenever they had a discussion in class where two people were on different sides of an issue, this was his first rule:

Repeat back the other person's view to their satisfaction before you respond.

"So you're saying you're really pleased with the Supreme Court appointments. Is that right?" or, "So you're saying you're really concerned about the behavior you see modeled by the President when he is challenged or opposed. Is that right?"

If they say you've misunderstood, then ask them to try again. And keep repeating it back to them until you get it right. And once you get it right, thank them for sharing.

I'm convinced that just that single step has the potential to begin to transform our conversations about politics.

Okay, so I've asked them a question and they've answered and I've repeated back their answer.

Now can I jump in with my opinion? Nope.

Proverbs 18.13 says:

To answer before listening-- that is folly and shame.

I like how the New Living Translation puts that verse:

Spouting off before listening to the facts is both shameful and foolish.

Now can I jump in with my evaluation of their opinion? Nope.

In his *Ted Talk* Jonathan Haidt says:

"You can't just go charging in saying you're wrong and I'm right, because everybody thinks they are right."

***C. Here's the next key. Don't respond with your opinion. Don't respond with judgment or evaluation. Instead, ask a follow-up question.***

Here are three examples of follow up questions that are not exactly conducive to continuing a conversation:

Are you kidding?

And you call yourself a Christian?

How in the world could you see it that way?

Despite the way they are portrayed in our polarized world, most people are not idiots, For the most part they hold their opinions for reasons that are reasonable within their perspective and understanding. So explore their perspective and understanding. Find out where they're coming from.

Here's what a good open-ended follow-up question might sound like:

You mean you see it this way? I find that really interesting.

Tell me more about that.

How did you arrive at that position?

And most people are not evil. It isn't fair to require nonChristians to share your moral framework, is it? And it isn't fair to require Christians to arrive at the exact same conclusion to complex political issues that you have. If someone has a moral or political

point of view that is different from yours, even if it is baffling to you, suspend your moral judgment and seek to understand it.

You might ask something like:

I'm curious. What would you say are some of the influences that have shaped your perspective on this issue?

Is there some moral tradition or framework that you turn to when you think about issues like this? I'd like to hear about it.

How has your own life experience shaped your view?

You don't need to memorize a list of these follow up questions. Just practice curiosity. Be fascinated. Be intrigued. And keep asking questions. And after they've shared, keep repeating their answers back to their satisfaction, and keep thanking them for sharing.

#### ***D. Listen for what you can affirm.***

This is a place where the us/them partisan divide in our politics doesn't serve us, because it misleads us into thinking political solutions are simple either/or choices.

But all political positions are compromises that we arrive at by trying to figure out how to balance and weigh a whole variety of different things all of which we value.

Here's what's true. There is no candidate or issue where there is an absolutely clear single Christian political response – however much you may be convinced there is.

I'm not saying the Bible is unreliable or Biblical morals are up for grabs. Not at all. I'm saying that all politics happens East of Eden. We are fallen people living in a fallen world, and we are trying to bring a whole host of Christian principles and biblical values to bear on incredibly complex societal issues. And we live in a society in which many don't share our religious or moral convictions, and as a result there are nearly as many opinions as there are people.

We can codify what the Bible teaches on many different themes, we can say: this is what the bible teaches about this topic: Human life. Sexual purity. Spiritual gifts. Stewardship. Love for neighbor, whatever it is. And there would be general agreement.

But there is not one universally accepted Christian position on political issues. And there is not one obviously right person for Christians to vote for, for political office.

If we were to weight our values and priorities in a slightly different way, Christians might vote on a different side of an issue or vote for a different candidate.

Let me give you just one example. As Christians we believe the Bible teaches that God gives the gift of life and that we are to honor and sanctify that gift.

So carrying that biblical teaching over into the political realm, we believe that abortion is wrong, right? It take the life of a child. It does. . . . Does that mean the right political

solution is to make all abortion illegal? I've sat in my office with a woman who was raped, and who wrestled with whether she could accept as her own the child she carried. And I've sat with a woman who had a medical condition that literally put her in a position of having to choose between her own life and the life of the child she carried. She agonized with the decision especially because she had other young children. The first one kept her child. The second one aborted her child. So what is the right political outworking of our biblical convictions with this issue? The biblical teaching about the value of human life is black and white: all human life is valuable. But that doesn't necessarily make the political solution black and white.

We can have much more honest and honoring conversations with one another, especially those whose starting points are very different from our own, when we keep in mind that all *political* decisions are compromises, and they all seek to balance a variety of competing values. This is the path to discovering what we can affirm in the other person's perspective.

***E. Understand that we each bring our own set of primary convictions and passions to our view.***

Jonathan Haidt, the author of *The Righteous Mind*, is a social psychologist who has given himself to studying political convictions. He has found a cluster of six major values that shape most people's political opinions.

All six of these are held by most people, but with different weights of importance.

For those who are social conservatives, they tend to elevate these three values:

Loyalty/Unity  
Authority/Order  
Sanctity/Purity

Combining these, their most sacred value is *societal stability*

And for those who are more progressive politically, they tend to elevate the other three values

Care for needy  
Freedom from oppression  
Fairness

Bringing these together, their most sacred value is *responsiveness to individual need*

So for those who are conservatives, they tend to elevate the overarching value of ***stability*** – maintaining unity and order, clarifying boundaries, and holding fast to underlying values

And those who are liberal tend to elevate the overarching value of **responsiveness** – adjusting to needs that surface, lifting up those who get missed, making changes along the way as necessary.

But everyone values all six to some degree. We can all appreciate the need for stability, such as when King Josiah called the nation back to covenant faithfulness in II Kings 22, and kicked the pagan priests and their shrines out of the temple, and ended child sacrifice and ritual prostitution.

And we can also all appreciate the need for responsiveness, such as the Good Samaritan modeled, when he sidestepped traditional decorum and crossed established lines of ritual cleanliness and took care of a foreigner who was hurt.

A great way to honor the person who has shared with you is to be able to find and affirm places where you uphold the same values.

Let me give you an example. Think about the issue of the border between Mexico and the US. The question of letting in new immigrants is largely framed in terms of two opposing views over which we are divided. You are either for letting them in or your against it.

But that is a false and divisive way to frame this issue.

We can all agree, every one of us, that we can't let everyone in. That would jeopardize our stability as a nation.

But we can also all agree, every one of us, that we shouldn't keep everyone out. There are legitimate needs, for instance, among children growing up in gang-controlled regions of central America where their lives hang in the balance, needs to which we feel compelled to be responsive with our freedoms and the riches of our resources as a nation.

So now we've moved from one issue over which we are all divided, to two values – stability and responsiveness – over which we can all agree. Now we can work together to find the best way to express and balance those two values.

Being quick to listen means listening for what shapes the heart of the person you are speaking with, and honoring them by hearing it.

We do that when we ask questions, repeat back what's been said to the other person's satisfaction, ask more questions, and then listen for what we can affirm.

In spite of the fact that he is an atheist, and uses some of his tips to try to talk people out of their faith, I really like Peter Boghossian's summary from his book *How to Have Impossible Conversations*. He says:

Most elements of civil discourse come down to a single theme: making the other person in the conversation a partner, not an adversary. To accomplish this, you need to understand what you want from the conversation, make charitable assumptions about the other's intentions, and seek back-and-forth interaction as opposed to delivering a message. Learning to listen is the first step.

Peter Boghossian, *How to Have Impossible Conversations*

He goes on to say:

Abandon adversarial thinking (the idea of winning) and adopt collaborative thinking (listening and learning). Shift from, "This person is my opponent who needs to understand what I'm saying" to "This person is my partner in a conversation and I can learn from him, including learning why he believes what he believes." (12-13)

Let's wrap up by giving this a try. This is a safe setting in which to try some of this. And if we can't do this in the church, where can we do it?

If at any point you'd rather not share, you can just say that.

Find someone you can have a short conversation with. Begin by asking the person to share one thing that informs how they choose a favorite restaurant. Then repeat back the person's views to their satisfaction and then thank the person for sharing with you. Just fifteen seconds each.

Now ask the person to share one thing that informs how they choose a close friend. Then repeat back the person's views to their satisfaction and then thank the person for sharing with you.

Finally I want you to ask the person to share one thing that informs how they will decide how to vote for president. Then repeat back the person's views to their satisfaction and then thank the person for sharing with you.

Last week while I was praying in preparation for this message a poem formed in my head. It's called "Give Me a Lever"

To understand this it will be helpful for you to know two words that might be unfamiliar.

*signum*: a large tower bell used to ring the hours for prayer, signal an alarm, or sound the death knell

*godspel*: archaic spelling: gospel, good news

And also to be familiar with a classic quote by Archimedes: "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world."



### Give Me a Lever

Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which  
to place it  
to brace it  
to displace it  
and I shall move the world  
wrist it and  
twist it and  
wrest it  
to my side

Give me a love deep enough and a signum by which  
to toll it  
to tell it  
to godspel it  
and I shall move the heart of the world  
ring it and  
sing it and  
bring it  
to his side

Let me close with a familiar prayer called The Peace Prayer, attributed to St Francis of Assisi. Let's make this our own prayer today:

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

"O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life." Amen.

## Kingdom Conversations

James 3.17

July 2020

Did you know we have an underground river that flows right through the middle of our city?

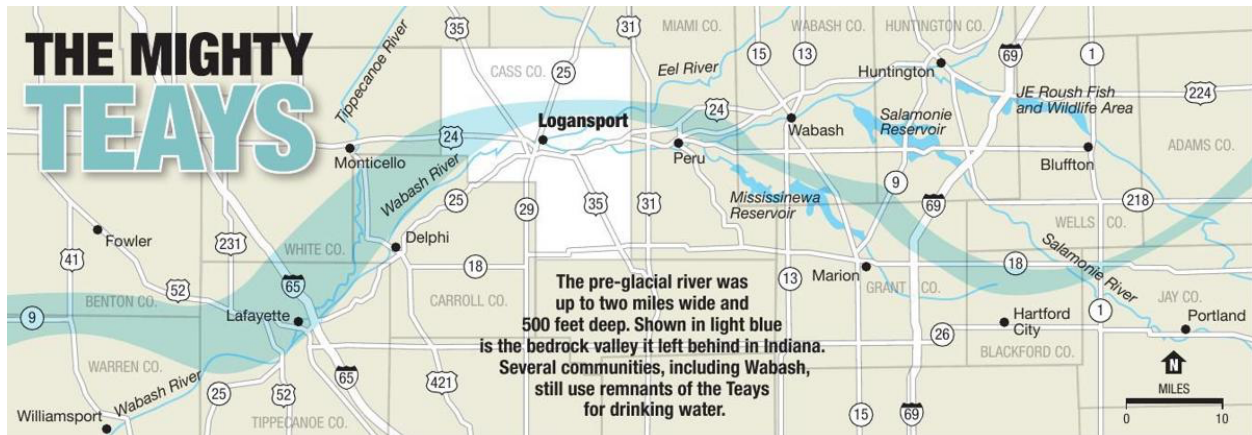
Those of you who are not from this area may not know that just down at the bottom of the hill from the church and dividing Lafayette from West Lafayette is the Wabash River, the major waterway in Indiana.

Well, about 150 feet beneath that is another river, called the Teays River.

It arcs all the way from Blowing Rock, North Carolina up through West Virginia to Ohio and then across Indiana and Illinois all the way to the Mississippi River valley.

They discovered it when they found mica from the mountains of North Carolina in soil samples here in Indiana, and they traced it backwards from there.

This picture shows the part of the Teays River that crosses Indiana.



I remember the first time I heard that we had an underground river here, and I thought that was so exciting. I pictured something with cool winding caves and underground waterfalls, kind of like Marengo Caves.

Kids, while you're with us this morning, you might think about drawing a picture of you exploring an underground river.

Unfortunately it isn't like that. It is a great big river valley that got completely filled in with rocks and gravel and sand from a giant bulldozer called the Wisconsin glacier – a huge ice sheet.

Today, water still runs through much of it, but the word “runs” isn’t exactly accurate. It trickles, only moving about 5 feet a day.

But there is a ton of it. The Teays River is over eight miles wide here. And the water in it is high quality water.

Wouldn’t it be cool to be able to see some water from the Teays River? Or even to drink some of it?

Brian Forkner is the superintendent of the West Lafayette office for Indiana American Water Company. He could not have been more gracious when I called with the unusual request of getting some water straight from the Teays River!

And here it is. Straight out of the River Teays. – thank you, Brian! Clean, pure, unfiltered, ready to drink.

Let me let you in on a secret that Mr Forkner told me. Do you want to drink some water from the Teays River? If you live in the Greater Lafayette area, just go turn on your faucet. Mr Forkner told me that pretty much every well in the city draws water from the Teays. Up from the wells, through the processing plant, and out the faucet at your house.

And here . . . is some water from the Wabash River. Can you see the difference? Yup. One’s clear. The other is . . . an ugly brown color.

The Indiana state report on what they call “water quality impairment” issues in the Wabash River is 257 pages long.

Don’t ever drink from the Wabash River. There are all kinds of things mixed into that water and you don’t want to know about any of them.

Today we are talking about how to have a conversation as a follower of Christ with someone you disagree with, whether or not that person is part of the church.

I don’t know if you’ve experienced this, but it seems like for the first few months of being under covid restrictions, even in the midst of the disruption and inconvenience, there was a lot of unity and graciousness and forbearance.

Now, having endured the ups and downs of this coronacoaster for months, and the whole business of social distancing and mask wearing, plus a declining economy, plus preelection mudslinging, and then experiencing the upheaval following the murder of George Floyd, and facing into the whole issue of racial bias and inequity, has made all of us a little bit testy and gritty, and conversations don’t seem to be going quite as well these days as they did a few months ago.

So how do we have conversations about things about which we have strong feelings and strong beliefs, but do that in a gracious and loving way?

And here's what I want to suggest. Most of us, when we have a conversation with someone about something we disagree on –

like who should sit in the Oval Office come January,  
or whether or not we should have to wear masks in public,  
or how we should view the protests that took place following George Floyd's death

- most of us have Wabash River conversations, up here, on the level of our disagreements, and they end up looking a lot like this water – stirred up with emotion, colored with impatience, clouded with our own narrow perspective.

But the passage we are looking at today calls us to have a conversation on two levels at the same time: on the Wabash River level – working through our disagreement – and on the Teays River level – where our intentions are pure, the conversation is life-giving, and we come away refreshed.

The passage we're looking is James 3.17-18:

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Okay, a bit of context.

First, to our series. This is the third and last message in a series called **Kingdom Come**

In the first message, looking at John 14 and 16, we talked about how the kingdom comes down into this world. Jesus steps into this world from above, and inaugurates his kingdom from above, and one day he will return from where he is seated above to consummate his kingdom.

In the meanwhile, the church is placed in this world to put the kingdom of God on display, to point up to the presence of the kingdom and to allow kingdom love and kingdom justice to pour down through us into the broken corners of this world.

Then last Sunday, looking at Colossians 3, we talked about how the kingdom comes down into an individual life and into our relationships. When we take the self out of the center of our lives and put Jesus there instead, when we set our hearts and minds on things above, he gives us a new life made in his own image.

Then, in our dealings with one another, he calls us to clothe ourselves in Christlikeness: to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, to bear with one

another, and to forgive one another, and over all of those qualities, to put on love – all qualities and actions that describe Jesus himself in the pages of the New Testament.

Today, using James 3.17-18, we're talking about how the king from above and the kingdom from above come down as wisdom from above into a particular moment, into a specific conversation between two people

And now some context about James 3.17-18.

This passage comes right in the middle of a longer section that starts in 3.1 and ends with 4.12. This whole middle section of the Book of James is about the power of our words: their power for good, but also their destructive power.

And the middle portion of that middle section is about the wisdom that gives life to our words. Let me read it for us, starting in James 3.13. Notice what it has to say about the two sources of wisdom that shape how our interactions go.

**James 3.13**

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

**James 3.14-16**

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

**James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

**James 4.1-2**

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.

**James 4.2-3**

You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Back then to our passage: James 3.17-18.

**James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes the most obvious things about a passage turn out to be the most startling and important to notice?

I think that's true of this verse in at least two ways.

First, you may have heard me say before that often the most important idea in an ancient document was found not at the end, where we would tend to look for it, but in the middle.

So this is what I'm certain is completely coincidentally the middle verse of the middle portion of the middle section of the Book of James. Or, in other words, one of the most important verses, if not the most important verse, in the whole book.

I wonder why that is? What does it tell us that a passage that is not about *what* to say, but about how to say it, I wonder about what that tells us about the heart of God for the way we relate?

]

Second, notice what this passage says where all of these peaceable and merciful qualities come from.

If I were to ask you where you would look for a quality like consideration or mercy to show up in a conversation, what would you say? Wouldn't you say, those things, if they come at all, arrive somewhere along the way in the conversation? When the person you are speaking with is able to show you consideration, and you are able to show you consideration in return?

And where you would look for peace in a conversation? Wouldn't you say, if you experience any peace, it comes at the end of it? You talk through your differences, and if you are able to come to a place of agreement, then you experience some measure of peace?

But according to this passage, when we have a kingdom conversation, we don't just hopefully end up with consideration, or mercy, or peace, if all goes well, and we don't wring each other's necks. We *begin* there.

This is not a passage describing the *outcome* of a kingdom conversation. This is a passage describing what we bring *into* a kingdom conversation.

Wading into the conversation and hoping that our differences will clear up so we can be nice to each other and end the conversation in peace is a Wabash River conversation.

*Starting* the conversation on the foundation of peace and mercy and impartiality - that's a Teays River conversation. And that is what we are called to as kingdom people.

So let's walk through the passage and explore these words one by one, and see what we can learn from them.

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure . . . [and so on]

#### **Pure**

The word *pure* means not mixed with anything that dilutes it or colors it. It's just the thing itself. That "but" at the start of the verse points to what some of those things are that we don't want to let get mixed into our conversation and color it or cloud it. It's the I-want-it, I-need-it, I-have-to-have-it self-seeking that's described in 3.14, and in 3.16, and again in 4.2.

By contrast, the person who approaches a conversation with purity comes into the conversation free of a self-serving agenda, and not wedded to things being seen their way or going their way.

Think how differently our conversations could go if we didn't have feel like something personal, some I-have-to-have-it thing, was at stake.

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving . . .

#### **Peace-loving**

This means relating in a peaceable and non-combative way. You approach the interaction as partners in the conversation rather than opponents.

In his book *How To Have Impossible Conversations*, Peter Boghossian says:

Shift your goal from winning to understanding. Abandon adversarial thinking (conflict, strife, arguing, debating, ridicule, and the idea of winning), and adopt collaborative thinking (cooperation, partnership, listening, and learning. Shift from, "This person is my opponent who needs to understand what I am saying" to "This person is my partner in a conversation and I can learn from him." (12-13)

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate . . .

#### **Considerate**

This is a word that conveys the idea of not ramping up or coming on strong when you feel offended, especially if you are a person who is in a position of authority or expertise, but responding gently and free of defensiveness instead.

It can be really hard, especially when we consider ourselves pretty knowledgeable about something, to respond graciously when someone pushes back.

I was blessed to be able to speak in the last few years with someone who is a Christian and identifies himself as gay and believes there is no contradiction between those two. When he asked me my view, I told him that I thought the Bible was clear that acting on same-sex attraction was not consistent with God's design or compatible with the Christian faith. He said pretty curtly, that it was obvious I'd not allowed my heart to enter very deeply into the issue. I could have said, "Well now look. Let me tell you all the study I've done and all the conversations I've had." And I did want him to know that this was not something I'd just glossed over. But before I described some of that, by God's grace, I was able to say something like, "I'm sure you're right. I think there is a lot of room for me to grow in empathy, and entering into other people's struggles. I don't think that's a particular strength of mine."

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive . . .

### **Submissive**

Probably a better translation for this word is "teachable."

It means having a humble enough view of your knowledge and its limits that you realize you could be wrong, and even if you are right, there is always so much more to learn. In Keller and Inazu's book *Uncommon Ground*, Shirley Hoogstra says, "Humility is rooted in the knowledge that some aspect of your starting point – a fact, a perception, a [point of] understanding – could be wrong."

I was talking across the street to my neighbor this week, having a great conversation about all kinds of things, including a really substantive conversation about spiritual things. At one point we were talking about God's mysterious purposes when we suffer and she said, "That's another thing I don't understand. I have two huge hangars full of things I don't know or understand." I love that humility. We could use us some of that.

This is a place where we evangelicals can get ourselves in trouble. At the heart of our theology of Scripture, and rightly so, is a bedrock belief that the Bible is completely trustworthy and without error because it was inspired by God's Spirit. But we can leap from that to thinking that because we have access to infallible truth, we are infallible. But just because I have a perfect source of truth doesn't mean I understand it all perfectly, or that I understand perfectly how it applies in every situation – especially in the sort of complex societal situations that face us every day, such as immigration and the border



wall, and gender dysphoria and rest room use, or the use of capital punishment in a court system that has sentenced so many innocent men to death.

Being teachable doesn't mean I'll step out from under the authority of Scripture. But it does mean being willing to acknowledge I may not know everything there is to know about Scripture and how it applies today.

In *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, Spock says to Bones, "Perhaps you're right." What great words to be able to say. If Mr Logical Brilliance can say those words, surely we can too.

HL Mencken letter to those who wrote to complain. Perhaps you're right.

"Mencken made two contributions to the Art of Letter Writing which should enshrine him in Valhalla. He received many vilifying letters and he had two answers for them: 1—'Dear Mr. Jones: Perhaps you're right.' 2—to more virulent critics, 'Dear Mr. Smith: I felt you should know that a character, obviously insane or a fool, is writing obscene and libelous letters and signing your name to them.' "

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit

### **Full of mercy**

This is the compassion that James Foster sought to foster in us a few weeks ago as he encouraged us to seek to understand the experience of Blacks in America. Being full of mercy means being genuinely concerned for the pain and struggle of the other person, seeing the other person not as the opposition but as a real person with real needs and hurts and struggles, and as someone who is touched by this issue in real ways.

When I am full of mercy, I seek to understand well before I seek agreement, and I continue to regard with compassion whether or not we ever come to a place of agreement.

### **Full of mercy and good fruit**

Jesus offers a provocative definition of good fruit. According to Matthew 3.8, it is doing deeds consistent with a changed heart.

And good fruit is about motions, not notions. It is mercy in action, showing a genuine desire for the other person's good in tangible ways. In a hard conversation, that means unwavering warmth, eye contact, not raising your voice, picking up the tab, expressing thanks.

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial

### **Impartial**

Impartial means not drawing lines between us: my camp versus your camp, with me or against me. There is so much polarizing language right now, so much that reinforces our us versus them tendency to divide up along lines of difference and band together with those who are like us.

I was thinking about how our language doesn't help us much here.

We have all sort of wedge words, words that divide us apart and assign us to camps:  
whites and blacks  
Christians and Muslim  
red states and blue states  
mask wearers and non-mask wearers

But in English we have very few words that emphasize our unity, our oneness  
Someone in my family I call my own flesh and blood.  
Someone in my church I call my brother or sister.

But we don't have a single word of the heart to capture the idea of a fellow human being

We used to. We used to refer to other people as "souls," implying that they are fellow created beings who like us bear the image of God. But the best we can do in English is the cold and formal "fellow human being."

Reflecting on this, I asked my friend Rafael from Mexico, if they had a word of the heart in Spanish like for a fellow human being.

He said, "Yes, *semejante*" – it's an adjective that means similar or alike, but when it is used as a noun, to refer to a fellow human being, and it's a way of saying "We are just the same, you and I."

That's what it means to be impartial. It's the spirit that says to the other person, "In spite of all the ways we are different, as ones created in God's image we're just the same, you and I."

Shirley Hoogstra says,

Bridge building is not possible if you do not have a genuine interest in knowing and understanding the person on the other side of the chasm you seek to traverse. And this interest must culminate in respect. Respect stems from the belief that people bear the image of God. It allows for a high view of every person. Respect isn't a synonym for agreement, but it does impact the way a person disagrees. One cannot respect another and harbor a desire to overpower that person through insults, dismissals, or derogatory actions. (133)

### **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

## **Sincere**

Sincerity is the difference between a meaningful connection between two fellow human beings and a game of chess to try to bring about a certain outcome.

According to the wisdom of the world, the ends justify the means. The goal is to score the points, to win the argument. I'll do whatever it takes.

Wisdom that comes from above rejects maneuvering and manipulating.

Instead, it is straightforward, vulnerable transparent and unguarded, a truthful representation of itself.

## **James 3.17-18**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

When we can keep the conversation there, at the Teays River level, not as a hopeful outcome but as the atmosphere in which the whole conversation unfolds, then James says this is the result.

## **James 3.18**

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Or as Jesus put it in his sermon on the mount.

## **Matthew 5.9**

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Let me come back to the question I asked earlier. Why would a passage like this be so important that James would put it at the center of his book? It doesn't even tell me what to say. It only tells me how to say it. Why is that so important?

Because how we relate isn't just part of how we communicate the truth. *It is part of the kingdom truth we communicate.*

And because, when we relate with love and respect, as peacemakers, we create a door into the conversation through which Jesus the King himself can step right.

So next time you have challenging conversation.

What is your view of the person in the Oval Office right now, and who should sit in said office come January?

Or, what safety measures, such as masks and social distancing, should be imposed on us as we go through the virus?

Or, what is the best way to view the protests that took place after George Floyd's killing and to respond to the concerns that they raised?

What would a Wabash River version of that conversation look like? And what would a Teays River kingdom conversation look like? What is God's invitation, what is his challenge, to you this morning?

Lord, we are your people. Make us more and more like you, make us more and more a version of you, as we walk this world and serve your ends and await your return.