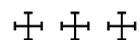


I'm going to talk about politics this morning.
Not about candidates and not even about issues,
but as we approach another election I'd like to talk about
how followers of Jesus should engage in the political life
of this state and nation that God has seen fit to place us in.

I'm hoping I'll remind you of a few things you already know,
and maybe put into words a few things you know intuitively
but haven't really articulated yet.

The plan is to start with a couple of things we all agree on,
then go just a bit deeper.
And if I don't get it right, I'll be standing at the back in about half an hour.

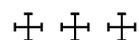


The first observation is...in this country, Christians have a duty to vote.

As a Christian living in Georgia and the United States,
you have an obligation to vote,
and to vote not just for your own interests but for who you think
will serve the common good.

Our system is flawed but the people who make decisions
about our state and nation are selected through elections
so part of how we love our neighbors is to help select leaders
who will serve the common good.

Christians vote.



The second observation is also pretty obvious,
even though living it out isn't always that easy.

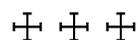
**You are a member of Christ's body before you are anything else,
and you should vote that way.**

If you have been baptized into the body of Christ,
then you have died with Christ and been reborn with Christ.

That identity is more fundamental than your citizenship or your ethnicity
or your cultural heritage or your political values or your military rank
or your marital status or your gender identity or your wealth.

First, you are a member of Christ's body
and everything else is secondary to core identity.

So as best you understand it, live as a member of Christ's body,
and vote that way.



My third observation starts by acknowledging that some of us
in the body of Christ are called to the political arena,
to governance and politics and advocacy.

If that's your calling, then you should engage in that work fully.
Say your prayers and then fight for what you believe in.
Pursue your goals with conviction.

But...if that is not your calling, then my third observation is for you.
Don't mistake political gossip for being an informed citizen.

Don't mistake demonizing candidates on the other side
and repeating exaggerated claims about the other side
for political convictions. Let's be better than that.

This morning St. Paul gives Timothy a warning,
and if you are not truly called to the political arena,
and by that I don't just mean having an opinion about the news.
I mean going door to door and raising money
and attending meetings and building coalitions.

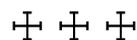
And if that's not who you are then I want to borrow Paul's wisdom
about church and apply it to this political climate we find ourselves in.

"Avoid wrangling over words," Paul says.

"Avoid wrangling over words, which does no good
but only ruins those who are listening."

I'm taking his advice out of context but I think applies.

Parroting the very worst of our political discourse,
and caricaturing people who see the world differently than you do,
ruins those who are listening.



The fourth observation is this:

**when we renew our baptismal covenant we promise to uphold
the dignity of every human being,
and that includes the people we think aren't committed
to upholding ours.**

When we make that promise we aren't just talking about people
it's easy to have sympathy for.

We promise to see and uphold the dignity of "errybody."
which includes the victims of hardship but also the arrogant
and the ungrateful and the people who say things
that make your blood pressure rise.

And it's extra hard during an election season.

I mean, I see the same attack ads you do.

I feel outraged at what the other side is doing,

and doubly outraged at the lies they tell about my side.

Just like you do.

So I'm preaching to the mirror here, especially on this topic.

But "love your enemy" applies to our political life,

and our scriptures this morning back that up.

✠ ✠ ✠

This story of Naaman being healed of his leprosy is noteworthy
because of who Naaman is.

Naaman is a military leader of Aram, a country to the north of Israel.

And the king of Israel is scared for Naaman to come

because the last king of Israel was killed by the army Naaman served.

But God's Elisha called Naaman to Israel so that God could heal him,

so that God could show Naaman and the king of Israel

that God's love and healing power stretches beyond
any military or political division.

And when Jesus healed 10 men of the same leprosy Naaman suffered from,
only 1 of the 10 turned back to give God thanks for the healing.

And the 1 who turned back was not one of God's covenant people,
but a Samaritan.

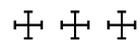
Israelites and Samaritans shared a history of resentment and mistrust
and sometimes even hatred.

But Jesus wanted to point out that no one is beyond

God's grace and no one is denied God's healing love.

As followers of Christ we have a duty to go the extra mile to show
that the people we oppose politically
are still BELOVED creatures of God.

And by the way in this country the vast majority of them
are baptized into the same body of Christ as we are.



The last observation is trickier to make, so bear with me if I miss the mark.

When we tell stories about ourselves, they not only describe us,
they also shape who we become.

This is true as individuals and I think it's true as a state and a nation.

Think of it like this: if the stories Emily and I told TO each other
and ABOUT each other were only the worst parts of who we are,
how would we see one another? How would it affect our marriage?

And if the only stories we told our children about themselves
were their failings and weaknesses,
what kind of adults would they become?

There's a reporter named Rachel Aviv,
who is very respected for her storytelling ability.

She's written a book about people who struggle with mental illness
and how for some people a diagnosis is like a story
that explains what they're dealing with.

But she says the paradox is that for some people that diagnosis, that story,
can be a lifesaver, while for others it can be a trap.

The diagnosis, the story of what they're dealing with,
can become their whole identity.

She says, "There are stories that save us and stories that trap us and in the midst of an illness it can be very hard to know which is which."¹

We face this same paradox as a people in our political life.

We face so many challenges as a people and it seems like
a moral imperative not only to name those challenges
but also to raise a righteous anger about the injustices
and failings of our state and nation.

But the danger is that when we speak to our failings,

we also shape our understanding of who we are.

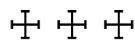
And the more we speak of the depravity of our opponents,
the more depraved they become.

And the more we tell of the futility of our democratic experiment,
the more its failure is assured.

We can't be blind to our failings & we definitely can't be silent about them,
but those of us committed to loving our neighbors
should also be very careful about the stories we tell about our leaders,
or about the other half of the country,
or about our state and nation.

Because it turns out people do hear us and it shapes who we become.

Like I said, I'm still trying to figure out that last part so if I missed it,
I beg your forgiveness.



¹ Rachel Aviv, "Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us."
Quoted by Ezra Klein on his podcast interview with Aviv from her book.

Now to summarize:

Christians have a duty to vote and they should vote first
as members of Christ's body, in whatever way they think is best.

And because Jesus taught us that what comes out of our mouths
can defile the world around us,
Christians should be careful with their words.

And Christians should love their political opponents
and uphold the dignity even of those who don't seem to be upholding theirs.

And finally, Christians should remember that even though
our hope is in God and not in our political leaders,
we can still speak a word of hope that God will never
abandon any of us as we try to preserve the common good
in this state and this nation where God has placed us.

Amen.