

Embodying the Gospel

Philippians 1: 27-30

²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

There is a general consensus that around this time, during an election year, we are done with politics. We grow weary of debates and around the clock commentary. We groan as attack ads get stacked, one on top of the other, while we are watching our favorite shows. And living in a swing state, our phones light up multiple times a day with texts and phone calls asking us to take surveys or reminding us the stakes are high. As a preacher, I am also done with politics. I wanted to give all of us a break from the political fiasco we are experiencing by focusing on something else. It's why I chose Philippians to preach on. It's known as St. Paul's letter of joy and we could all use a little more joy these days. More joy. Less politics. But this week the Holy Spirit ruined all of my plans.

St. Paul tells his congregation that they are to live their lives in a manner worthy of the gospel. It sounds straight forward enough. Except, the word for "life" here is *politeuesthe*. It's a political term where we get the words "policy" or "polity." Live your *politeuesthe*—your political life—in a way that is worthy of the gospel. St. Paul is telling the church to get political.

As we allow that to sink in let's admit: when it comes to politics we would like to keep it separate from our spiritual lives. One of the advantages of being in church is that we can sit next to people who may not agree with our political perspectives and still co-exist—as long as things don't get too political. A preacher once shared that after their church service there was a parishioner who would walk through the greeting line only when he disapproved of her sermon. As he walked by her, he would say four words: "Too political, strike one." A couple Sundays later he grimaced at her going through the line again, "Too political, strike two." A few weeks later after the pastor preached a Good Friday sermon, she saw him coming down the pipe so she said, "Let me guess, 'Too political'." He just put up three fingers and said, "Strike three." And he never came back again. It is painful to lose friends and good members over politics. So in the church, for the sake of keeping the peace, we tend to prefer to keep politics out of the pulpit, out of our spiritual lives and even, out of the gospel.

Except, St. Paul messes everything up! What does he say? "Live your *politeuesthe* in a way that represents the gospel of Christ." For St. Paul being faithful to the gospel is being political—not partisan, but political. Think about it: St. Paul sits in prison for a political crime. He writes to a

community who are being oppressed by the politics of the Roman empire. And then he tells them that are to conduct themselves politically in a way that lines up with Christ, who was crucified by a political system. He even goes as far as to tell them that their suffering is connected to his suffering which is connected to Christ's suffering because they are all being oppressed by the same political system. St. Paul knows that the good news of the gospel grinds against what the empire enforces. He knows the system is fine with letting Jesus into our hearts, but they don't want him to get inside our bodies: our bones, our hands, our feet, and our voices. He knows the powers that be are fine with personal salvation theology where Jesus died for our sins; but it better not become a social revolution where Jesus rises among his people to resist the system which crucified him in the first place!

St. Paul is telling the church it is time to get engaged, because the gospel is about an incarnational people who follow an incarnational God, who stand firm in incarnational, non-violent ways against any policy or politics which threatens our personhood.

"Live your *politeuesthe* in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ."

Friends, this is our tradition. This is who the church is and what the church has always stood for. We are people who embody the gospel of liberation and hope and stand firm in the good news that the Jesus Movement is alive.

Did you know that after the Revolutionary War, King George blamed "pulpits and pubs" as the cauldrons of sedition. We know Presbyterians were in both places—where the gospel was preached and where fellowship was shared. Some Brits even called the revolution the "Presbyterian rebellion." They were living their *politeuesthe*.

So maybe on election day we meet in the church parking lot and hold vigil. And if we catch word that there is a polling place where someone is trying to intimidate voters, we go and stand firm as a non-violent barrier—unintimidated by our opponents. Or, if that is too bold, we commit to standing firm against the spread of disinformation. Or we lean in by signing up to be a poll worker or getting out the vote. The Holy Spirit is still upon us to live our *politeuesthe* in a gospel way. It is our tradition and always has been.

So, I am sorry. I really did not want to preach a political message today. But in the end it's the gospel. And in a time when the soul of the nation is at stake, and what could be the most important election of our lifetime, our neighbors are counting on us to be the church. God is counting on us, too. So next time we hear that the church is being too political, perhaps we point to St. Paul, and to Jesus, and to the gospel they preached, and then we simply shrug our shoulders and say, "Too political? Amen!!!"