

## **A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO AMERICAN POLITICS**

This Sunday feels to me like it should be Civic Sunday. It falls on the day before we commemorate Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior, and it's also the Sunday before we have inauguration of our next president. And here we are in Washington DC, the center of a city, a city in turmoil and we are at a place called Holy City. And it seems to me a good place to ask the question, in our culture right now, what is a Christian response to America's political crisis? And so we look at the gospel of John and we see the story of the cleansing of the Temple and that text has been used by Christians on both sides of political causes to say, "See Jesus gets angry, Jesus got violent, we can be too." And I'm sure that's how it will be used many times in the coming weeks. I see the text as pointing to something very different. I think John is challenging us, at not just the literal level but also at the spiritual level and I want to come back to what John has in store for us.

I think you'll agree that our political system right now is quite broken. The animosity on both sides is quite dangerous. We are no longer people who disagree politically; we are enemies of each other. We are good, they are bad and it's become a dangerous situation. Now, I know that politics is something that most people feel is dirty, sleazy, manipulative, something that we should avoid and certainly pastors should avoid. And when it comes to preaching from the pulpit for partisan reasons, I would agree, that is wrong and it's frankly illegal but politics, itself is a very important space and it serves a very important role. Politics is the realm in a Democracy where we resolve our differences without force. It's a major movement forward in the history of the world but in the past we resolved it by who had the strongest army and who had the strongest King and who could conquer us and rule over us. Democracy said "We can resolve our differences without force, by voting.

People will have a voice" and I think it's a very sacred space- American democracy, and it's done much good in the world and I'm worried about it. I'm worried that if we continue escalating in this country in political attacks of one another without a sense of the common good that we can go backward and as we move backward what will arise in its place are strong men or women, who will be the strongest not allowing voices of descent and that's a very dangerous place to be.

Over my adult life since I've lived in Washington, I've watched each political party de-legitimize, each president that's been here. We remember the impeachment of Bill Clinton, we remember the close election of George W. Bush, we remember Barrack Obama's birth stories that he was not legitimate and now we are coming into another president where people are saying the same thing and I think this constant tearing at our fabric is quite dangerous. So what does a Christian respond? Do we engage in the battle? In my opinion, the Christian world has also, for the most part, been pulled into the hyper partisanship. We have not been above the debate, we have not been facilitators of the discussion, we have chosen sides and we now have a Christian right and a Christian left.

Not too long ago, a couple years ago, if you remember when Barrack Obama was giving his eulogy in Charleston and he sang 'Amazing Grace' and I get choked up thinking about it, it was very moving. And I was watching at the home of a prominent Conservative leader, religious conservative and he said, "Turn that off! We don't watch that man in this house. Turn that off and I cannot believe that your tearing up," in response to my response. More recently I was with a group of progressive Christian leaders who took and voted to say we must end name-calling and making fun of people in the political world. After we voted in favor of it, a preacher got up and said, "Doctor Ben Carson, I finally figured it out. He's a brain surgeon who has taken out his own brain." The room erupted into laughter and screaming and yelling and it took minutes to quiet everybody down from the giggles

of making fun of Doctor Ben Carson. I'm afraid that we have blind spots now in our culture and we're now imitating the decay and the breakdown in the culture. We as Christians are not separating ourselves, we are not different.

This last week, the national cathedral had to explain to its members why its choir was singing for inauguration and why they were allowing the Cathedral to be used. They faced such criticism. So what does the Gospel of John and Jesus in the temple give us any guidance on how we can operate? I believe that the spiritual level of that text, what John is doing and John is the only gospel where the cleansing takes place at the beginning of the gospel; the other three gospels, it happens at the end. If you're a literalist, there were two cleansings but I think John is trying to make a point. John is the more spiritual gospel and I think he's saying, Jesus has come to upend things, the status quo is about to change, the way that you've been thinking is going to be flipped on its head. Your religious sanctimoniousness and self-righteousness is being chased out. That's what I think the story is about and I think that text guiding us at a spiritual level, the rest of the gospel of John, and all the gospels, is Jesus constantly upending the status quo. He's always taking on the religious establishment and saying "You who think you're sanctified and self-righteous and you have all the answers, wake up! To be a Christian means to always be humble, to always be evolving, to always be growing, to always be admitting new mistakes. You're never there, as soon as you think you're there, you're not." That's the challenge of Jesus and that's the challenge of the temple- challenging the status quo, the religious establishment of His day.

So what can we do? Well, we know at the end of the text, Jesus says the temple will be destroyed and it will be built in three days. What is He referring to? Obviously not the temple itself. He's talking about Himself. He will die and rise in three days.

Jesus is also giving us a prophetic warning that the Christian life is a life of sacrifice. It means running against the grain, it is not about the kingdom on this earth, it is a different kingdom. It is running against what's popular. There will be sacrifice. In the case of Jesus, it was His life. In the case of Martin Luther King Jr., it was his life. For most of us it will be a sacrifice of being right, of having all the answers. If the Christian Church in the United states could be the facilitator, could be the one that doesn't have to win the debate but knows the debate has to go on but doesn't need to win it but can facilitate it, we have a unique role in American politics at a very critical time.

Last February I was quoted in a Harvard Divinity School magazine and I said something that brought me a lot of criticism and jokes because I said something to this effect, "If Trump beats these folks in the primary, I think he could win the election," and so that was seen as silly. I had another prediction: American democracy is not a given, it is not guaranteed it is not promised. If we keep delegitimizing each other and turning each other into enemies and we're interested more in scoring political points than building our country, we will lose it. And so I think the Christian church at this time needs to break from being a voice for either party or either extreme and speak the gospel which is about love, compassion, forgiveness and humility. Amen.