

First Presbyterian Church
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Communion Meditation: "Questions People Ask V: Living Faithfully and Respectfully in Partisan Times?"
August 06, 2017
Matthew 7: 1-12

Dialogue about contentious issues has become paralyzed by the winning/losing mentality. When we can no longer speak, we are all losers. And the genius of our democracy suffers.

We had 28 people for Thanksgiving last November. It was a lot of fun – and sentimental too, the last one we would spend in the Westhampton Manse where we had spent so many, 19, before. We welcomed future in-laws – neighbors – whose wedding I officiated almost thirty years ago. If you left hungry it was your own fault. We served it buffet style and it was hard to find an open space for the creamed onions – one of my favorites. Thanksgiving here on Long Island is one of the best holidays. Going to farm stands for the Brussel Sprouts and cauliflower. Seafood freshly caught.

But one concern was this: amidst the crowd were people who had voted for different candidates – Possibly – I don't know for sure – supporters of at least four. And yes , there were a few I suspect who had not voted at all – shame on them.

I had read the guidelines about keeping it civil during the holidays – and not wanting to offend anyone or alienate anyone, we put out the word that Thanksgiving 2016 was a "Politics Free Zone". In other word, no electioneering allowed. No character assassination. No triumphant rants –no finger pointing. No condescension. No victory laps. Nothing that would hurt another.

In retrospect – I regret this silencing – I regret it only because the genius of our democracy requires honest conversation. It requires the open dialogue which has no winners, no losers – but fellow citizens, exchanging ideas. Our 20th Thanksgiving in the Westhampton manse was joyful and memorable in every way. But I am left to wonder, was it necessary to put a gag order on political discussions? Or have our conversations about political issues dissolved into the frenzied banter of sports fans furiously debating who's number 1?? A politics free Thanksgiving?! What does it say about us?

Gloria Reuben – a seasonal friend of First Presbyterian asks the question this week. She begins with her dissent and goes on to ask how we can live faithfully and respectfully in partisan times – when our disagreements harden into disgust and we take things personally because that's the way they are intended? Is there a word from the Lord about this question? Or are we left to hope that things will change and conversations about political issues will return to respectability?

The place to turn is the Gospel of Matthew – the Sermon on the Mount – the Golden Rule. It is as fundamental to adults as it is to the children in the Sunday School class where I learned it as a child, in the Presbyterian Church where I was raised. If you memorized the books of the Bible you were awarded a ruler – 1 foot- 12 inches, with this rule inscribed there on – "Do unto others – as you would have them do unto you."

If you look into the teaching of eight of the world's religions you will discover some form of this rule. Hinduism – this is the sum of duty – "do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you." In Islam – "no one of you is a believer until he desires for His brother that which he desires

for Himself. “ A bit different wording in Taoism – “Regard your neighbors gain as your gain, and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.”

In short- what we hear in Jesus’ first sermon is a call to honor and respect our neighbor in the same way we honor and respect ourselves. Whether it is in our discussion of matters we agree on – or matters where we disagree.

Let the church help renew all our conversation – moving us away from winning/losing, to a new day where we find ways to honor each other and respect each other. Our conversations need to be less about blaming and more about solutions to problems. They need to be less about what advances our positions – and instead what advances our community. Our conversations need to be less partisan – and more about the common good! Let our conversations about anything reveal that we are an ethical people, bound together by responsibility to care for each other – for our communities, for ourselves, for God!

I was listening to a lecture by Sam Wells – former Dean of the Chapel at Duke – it was a tribute to Stanley Hauerwas, an ethicist was retiring. Sam reference all that made Stanley mad: Comparing him to Jesus who lost his temper when he entered the Temple at Passover - to find it changed into a money-making enterprise. He turned over the tables and scattered the vendors. The overriding question: “I thought this was supposed to be about God!” Stanley Hauerwas has had a running argument about the Church – whenever we have fallen away from our core purpose. It’s supposed to be about God.

When our conversations become so partisan that we disrespect the other – we need to remember the silent partner in those conversations – God- and His golden rule.

When we disrespect someone because they belong to a different political party – we need to remember the silent partner in our thoughts. The sovereign God who sees us –when there is such disrespect – His is the first heart to break.

In answer to Gloria Reuben’s question – let there be no retreat, no withdrawal- let there be a willingness to listen. Speak without condemnation- Engage another regardless. It will not be easy. It will however be more Christ-like than the current climate. In answer to Gloria’s question – How to live faithfully /respectfully: Follow the commandment – and so far as it is up to you – practice the golden rule. It is remarkable. The things we learned in Kindergarten are indeed so relevant to the dilemmas of adulthood.

The history of the Westhampton Church is telling. When we first arrived in 1985, Millie happened to sit on the eastern side of the Sanctuary. The late Cufa Bailey approached her and complimented her – “Welcome I’m so happy to see you here. We have never had a pastor’s wife sit on the Quogue side before.” The Quogue side? There’s a Quogue side and Westhampton side? And then there’s a middle section where Millie sat. It’s usually filled with newcomers who are less worried about geography.

The source of this labeling? The church was founded at Beaver Dam overlooking the water off of Montauk Highway. A century and a half ago they elected to move to a more central location, its current address on Quiogue closer to Quogue. The reason was, although it’s not in the minutes, so that the Quogue members did not have to travel so far. The Westhampton members came out on the minority side of that decision which led many to leave the church and go to Westhampton Methodist or

establish the Remsenburg Community Church. The dispute left a lot of hurt feelings. And to this day – there is a Quogue side, a Westhampton side,. And yet when the church is at its best – there is only one side – the body of Christ where every member matters regardless of where he or she sits in worship!

There are issues before us as a nation and as a people that go beyond partisan solutions. There are issues which will be resolved not by winners leaving a trail of losers. Let the church of Jesus Christ show in its beliefs as well as our practices, that our first priority is God and His commandments.

Speak up in these partisan times. Faithfully. Respectfully. And our democracy – as well as our lives – will be the better for it. Speak up. And these truths we teach in Sunday School will indeed make our world a better place.