

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
20 October 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“The Politics (Passion) of Jesus”
Thriving in Goodness for Good and for GOOD

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Mark 10:35-45

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

You gotta love James and John.
Being bold enough to say out
loud what most of us would
never dare admit; that we
wonder (and worry) about
whether we are “doing enough”
to get on God’s “good side,” to
be “close to” Jesus.

Well, Lord help James and John
and Lord help us. Here we are
imposing human hierarchies
onto heaven, while Jesus is
trying to get us to look at how
we are living here on earth.

He flips this whole question
from James and John about
who’s gonna be on the right or
the left on its head and he poses
his own questions in return.

“Can you drink the cup I
drink?” Meaning, the cup that
represents my blood and
sacrifice, my sharing of myself
with others, my serving,
forgiving, and communing
equally with others? Are you
doing those things too?

And are you “ever gonna be
baptized as I am ?” Meaning,
are you going to die to self and
rise again to walk in a new way,
My Way, the Way of Love?

You see, these are behavior
questions for the Here and Now,
not belief questions about the
Hereafter.

At the heart of this text is a truth
we all need to hear, especially in
the final stretch of this
Presidential Election.

Asking about being on the Right
or the Left is not the Question.
The Question is not about *your*
preferred position (or lifetime
political party affiliation)...the
Question is where are the
people? Where is the suffering
and are you going on into those
places, to those people? Where
is the place of greatest need and
are you voting in service of
those people, *those* needs?

Jesus say the way to be near me
is to be near my people to *draw*
near to my people with

intention and urgency (this is not passive!). And draw near not just to any people, but the people who do not have power and privilege...the people who do not yet have a place, the people who have been displaced.

Jesus has never been concerned about who has (or who is earning) “the best seat at the table.” All he cares about is that every person has a seat at the Table and that we never stop pulling up chairs. In fact, I suspect that he’s not even sitting down at the Table, because if we believe that he is reflected in each and every person around the Table, then if ALL people are not yet around that Table, then neither is he, at least not in the entirety of his spirit.

Jesus’ passion is about the people who have yet to find their seat, because until they do, he can’t sit down either. And if he can’t sit down, what makes us think we can? We’ve gotta keep pulling up chairs.

This passage, and countless others in the Gospels, makes it clear that Jesus prioritizes service over “success,” humility over hubris, the “left out” and “left behind” over those “already leading.”

Jesus’ *passion* is for the vulnerable and marginalized—for women, (especially widows), for children, (especially orphans), for poor folks, and those from other countries and religious backgrounds (think Samaria), for those with disabilities and illnesses and diseases, those who are suffering, and you know what I’ve been thinking about this week? Jesus’ passion is for those who maybe had similar circumstances to him. Those who grew up with a teenage mom (who was pregnant before marriage), the son of a blue collar worker (not an elite leader). Those who, like him—might grapple with their identity of being Jewish yet born in Palestine (Bethlehem) and born into unstable housing at that! All because of a government ordered census (proving edicts and policies do sometimes lead to real world consequences, like evictions!). People who, like him, are growing up in dangerous times under a maniacal tyrant, in Jesus’ case, one who wanted absolute authoritarian power and made absurd claims like “kill all the boys under age 2” and “get rid of them” because of the king’s worry about “one who might threaten his power as king,” which meant his family

had to flee this threat of political violence and go to yet another country and place for refuge when he was a toddler...meaning he had already moved multiple times as a child, and was a refugee crossing borders once, then twice. People who then, like him, might beat the odds, and grow up to go to trade school to become a carpenter. People who, like him, would follow a calling and a dream from God that required him to be a nomad, creating community wherever he went. People who, like him, chose not to marry or have children but live a single life with friends and close companions (completely redefining “family values” by the way!). People, like him, who even maybe have a relative in prison, in Jesus’ case it was his cousin, John the Baptist, who was not only imprisoned but also beheaded by “the state,” given the death penalty because of a brutal government that did not value life. People who, like him, were more comfortable at the tables of sinners than the sanctimonious. People who, like him, care about finding and giving healing and forgiveness rather than having more and more or following the rules of an empire that had no basis in the law of loving God or loving

others. People who, like him, would lay everything down for love, who truly understand that it is never about just what is best for ME but always about what is best for YOU and if we can focus on what is best for others, somehow that finally helps us realize that what is best for others is best for us, and we are all in this together. Not You or Me, but We and Us. People who, like him, others called Crazy because he was unconventional and turned the tables upside down. Jesus loves *these* kinds of people. They are his passion, and it should make us think when we don’t see these kinds of people prioritized in policies, let alone represented in leadership!

Jesus’ passion was for people because people are the *imago dei*, the image of God. And—*Lucky for us!*— because Jesus prioritizes people that means he cares about politics.

The word “politics” simply refers to the way that people are governed, it’s how people put together laws to manage or order human society, for example, how we distribute resources or agree to behave around one another. Politics was never meant to be so partisan or polarizing; it was meant to be

empowering. Politics (from Ancient Greek πολιτικά (politiká) means 'affairs of the cities'; it is the set of activities that are associated with making decisions in groups, or other forms of power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of status or resources.¹ 4th century philosopher, Aristotle, has a work titled, *Politics*, which literally means "the things concerning the πόλις (polis)", and it is the origin of our modern English word politics. As Aristotle explains, politics is the study of how people should best live together in communities — the *polis* being seen by him as the best and most natural community for humans.² And interestingly, early understandings of polis—or cities, communities—also had an inherent respect not just for the people in that area, but the very land itself,³ so that what is for “the good of the whole” concerns both people and land.

Oh how far we have gone astray, right? It's so far from how we think of politics today...as a dirty word, not a beneficial one.

If you are like me, you are feeling a very wearying mix of emotions these days surrounding the Presidential election. A lot is at stake. You may feel despair, anxiety, stress. You may be feeling fired up and hopeful and inspired, or, hopeful it will just all be over soon. You may be feeling disgusted. You may be feeling overwhelmed or confused, or even apathetic, wondering what's the point anymore...it's all power plays and political machines fueled by billions of dollars. You may be one who really, really cares—checking the polls every day, doing all you can to “get out the vote.” You may, simply, not care. Realizing that this country has had many Presidents before, these things ebb and flow, in the end “it will all be okay” (which is, by the way, a very privileged place in which to stand!) Or, you may care, but don't really know what to do with what you care about, how to actually make a difference beyond voting. All of these feelings are normal. Feel them all you want. But also remember this: our feelings are not how we live out the gospel. Actions are. And if politics is all about how we organize as a people to care for

¹ References from multiple places, beginning at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics> and then researched from other source materials. Accessed on Oct. 20, 2024.

² Accessed on October 20, 2024 at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_\(Aristotle\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_(Aristotle)).

³ Accessed on October 20, 2024 at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polis>.

the people, then not only did *Jesus* care about politics, we must too.

You know what I think Jesus is so taken aback by James and John's demand for him to give them whatever they want? Because of what Jesus had just finished telling them. Context is everything.

Directly before today's passage, Jesus foretells his own suffering, death, and resurrection. For the **THIRD** time. Verse 32:

³² They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the gentiles; ³⁴ they will mock him and spit upon him and flog him and kill him, and after three days he will rise again."

Jesus has just told his disciples this, **AND**, he told it to them on the way to Jerusalem, that is, the very place where all this suffering and death would happen.

On the one hand, Jesus must be like: *Come on guys?! Are you kidding? I just told you all this about how I'm going to die and you respond by arguing about where you're gonna sit in heaven after I die?*

But on the other hand, I imagine James and John are experiencing a lot of pain and grief right now, and perhaps they just can't bring themselves to believe it might be true.

So while James and John seem obtuse, insensitive, and very "power-grabby," maybe they are just afraid. Maybe they feel things spiraling out of control, like things are changing so fast they don't know what to do with their anxiety or grief.

And you know, that's a pretty normal thing. Fear makes us insecure. Uncertain. Fear makes us cling tightly (the opposite of "release!") Fear keeps us from having any room to receive new ideas or thoughts or ways of understanding. Fear makes us insular. Fear makes us forget, and sometimes forego, our values.

But as people of faith, we are called to consider what *Christ* values and let it challenge us and shape us and convict us.

The values of Christ must shape our votes. Because voting is an action like anything else and it reflects God's love to the world, and it reveals where our loyalties lie.

These days, it seems that we hold more tightly to our identity as Democrats or Republicans or Independents than we do our identity as a Christian. But what it means to be a Democrat and/or a Republican has deeply changed over time. It used to be one party represented the intellectual elite, now another one does. It used to be that one party represented the working poor or rural voters, now another one does. It used to be that one party respected the institution of government and tradition more and now another one does. Partisan politics shift and change. The pendulum swings. Our values do not. We must vote our values; the stakes are too high, the call of Christ too clear.

Because when we vote our values, we take politics seriously, which means we take people seriously.

How we think about the kingdom of God and what we believe about God's vision for all people, that can't help but

shape our values and inform our vote.

I want us to take just a moment an look at just one issue to give you an example of what I mean about letting the values of Christ, the values of our faith, shape our vote.

Immigration: The fact is borders are man-made, and people's lives are God-made.

While immigration is a complex issue with many factors to consider, when in doubt or weighing pros and cons or policy, the call of Christ is to prioritize the needs of the refugee, immigrant, vulnerable. This is not about what's "ours" and "theirs"...it's about what is "God's" and how we ALL care for each other. Christ above Caesar. Faith above Country. People above Borders.

And when thinking about this issue, how often do you do so from the lens of what you pray each week in the Lord's Prayer: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven."

How many of us imagine heaven as a place where people are all sectioned off into countries and categories? No one! I think we think of heaven

as a place where all people are together...where the kin-dom of God is alive and well. Well if this is true, and we are praying for the kin-dom of God to be on earth as it is in heaven, then that means we are praying for the barriers that borders put up (access to safety, healthcare, family reunion, etc.) must come falling down right? In other words, if the kin-dom of God is to come to earth as it is in heaven, then how can we use that truth to shape our values about what we believe around immigration and occupation?

There are so many examples, but pick any topic you like and read it through the lens of the gospels and Christ's teachings. I guarantee you that if you are struggling with what is the "right thing to do" or how to shape your values to inform your vote...you'll find it in scripture. It may not be what you WANT to hear, it may require sacrifice on your part, but it's there, I promise.

And this is not about agreeing or disagreeing with me. This is about mining through scripture to parse out your own values and faith. You may disagree with me or have other ways you contextualize your faith. But ultimately, fear cannot be the driver of our faith, and it cannot

be the driver of our politics either.

Do we believe in the radical welcome of Jesus? If so, our own personal or private interests must take a back seat to what serves the most vulnerable. Even if it's hard, even if it's messy, even if we don't like it, or it pushes our comfort zone.

And a final point, and an important one. People aren't the only passion of Jesus. His sacrifice and suffering is another kind of passion. Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion are called the "Passion of Christ." Passion comes from the Latin word *Passio*, which means suffering.

Not only has Jesus just told his disciples he's going to suffer and die before this exchange with James and John, he then tells them that while they are asking theoretical questions about where they're going to sit in the Hereafter, they need to be thinking about what they are actually practically doing in the Here and Now. He references the Cup and Baptism, pointing them to metaphors for suffering. Then he says very concretely, how I organize the care of people is through my passion, that is, my suffering, which is tied to, my serving. I do not lead

by lording anything over you, I lead by suffering, by serving. In other words, Jesus tells the disciples they are asking the wrong question. The question is not what they need to do to get to the top. The question is what do they need to do to be great (aka, to do great, or good) here on earth. And the answer to Being Great, or Doing Good, here on earth, is creating an equitable playing field for one another. That's what matters. When we are serving one another—giving and receiving—we are all in it together. Nobody is higher or lower. We are together. In the politics of Jesus, he replaces hierarchy with humility. And humility is a value that drives his service, and even his suffering. In fact, Jesus makes this undeniably clear when he says that he'll give his life as a ransom for many (vs 45). He does not place his life as higher than another, even one who has a 'criminal record,' and by his example, we're given a LOT to think about!

Some might read a substitutionary atonement theory onto this verse, meaning this means that "Jesus died for the sins of all humanity, like as a barter or exchange with God." However biblical scholar

Clifton Black points out that that atonement theology from the medieval era centuries later should not be read back onto Mark's Gospel, and nor is it Mark's point. In fact, looking at the root word here and the biblical history and context, "ransom" (*lytron*) refers to the the market compensation required for release or "redemption" of property. There are examples of this from the Old Testament (Ex 21:8, 30; Lev. 25:47-52; Num 3:45-51)—and it keeps emerging in the Bible as a vital religious metaphor for the reclamation of God's people (Ex 6:6; 15:13; Isa 43:1-7; 44:21-23), especially related to Jesus (Rom 3:23-25a; 1 Tim 2:5-6; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Central to Mark's point is the immediate context in which he rights: Ransom refers to a literal release of property, in this case human life as deemed as property by the authorities. "[As you will recall in the passion narrative, Jesus freely offers his own life for the release of a murderous captive, Barabbas (15:6-15). The depth and power of this is matter enough for easily befuddled disciples to

ruminate [for days].”⁴ Why does Jesus do this? Is this what suffering means? Is that what serving means?

I think if we grapple honestly with this, we must consider the fact that the answer very well may be “Yes.” Barabbas went free, not because the leaders in power ordered it, but because the people in the crowd did. They yelled for Jesus to be crucified. They gave the authority for the exchange. Their voice had power. And so did Jesus’ choice to be silent, because in that moment, on request of the people, Jesus’ life is literally exchanged for someone else who is on death row. It is a selfless act. Jesus is given a chance to speak up, to say something, and he doesn’t. Mark 15:4-5: “*So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”*”

⁵ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.”

It is a demonstration of sacrifice. An embodiment of love. We have taken “ransom” to a whole other level saying that God had to have Jesus killed in order to pay for our

sins, but in fact, Jesus himself as a human made a choice in that moment to say that life is valuable, even the lives of those who have done bad things.

Truly an act that should turn our minds over in somersaults as we think about capital punishment and punishment, in general.

What are we to learn from this? (And I don’t think the point is for us to go around trading ourselves for others, but rather realizing that we have a choice in how/why we punish, and the people could have stopped yelling “crucify Jesus” but they didn’t. Both could have been free. We tend to see either/or. Christ calls us to both/and.

This is food for ongoing thought, but all of these moments in scripture are the moments that, if we follow Jesus and truly desire to listen to his teaching, we must grapple with. If our values are shaped by the Spirit of Christ, the Life of Jesus...then stories like this cannot be dismissed. I cannot tell you how to interpret this story, only that it needs to be part of what you think about when you think about what you value and how your values shape your vote.

⁴ C. Clifton Black, “Mark 10:35-45: Exegetical Perspective,” eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised*

Common Lectionary Year B, Volume 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, 193.

This is what IS clear: the choice Jesus makes is a choice that can only be born from love. From a belief that people matter. From a politics that places people over power.

Which brings me back to Jesus' *passion*. The "passion of Jesus" in theological terms refers to the suffering and death of Jesus and the literal crucifixion of his body. Might we consider, and remember, that we are the *Body* of Christ in the world today? So if Jesus' body suffered before resurrection, then we, too, must expect to suffer in order for resurrection and new life and literally a whole new world order to come to be?

When we think politically, we have no choice but to think of the people who are already suffering and how we can serve them, what we can sacrifice for them, bringing them through to resurrection and new life through access to rights like health care, housing, status, food, employment. And as we recognize that in serving those who are suffering, we too, will likely suffer, it will take some sacrifice. In the name of serving. In the name of Christ. In the name of humility. In the reality of drinking the cup. In the reality of being raised up

from the waters of baptism. From what I read in the gospels, there is just no way to live out our faith in a way that excludes suffering, sacrifice, or serving others.

I know this is not what you want to hear your pastor saying. Especially in a time that you are feeling anxiety and worry about this election. I get it. I don't want to hear it either. When I preach, I'm preaching from a place of wrestling and fellow struggle, not from a place of piety or having it altogether or getting it right.

But it definitely shapes my thinking and my values when you realize that the same Christ that lives in me, lives in every other person. It changes everything. As Matthew's gospel says so clearly in chapter 25:45-46, "*Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?*" ... "*Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.*" How we treat others; how we engage with politics, the care of people? It speaks directly to how we care for Christ and how we engage with God.

I don't think it's meant to be a chastisement, I think it's meant to provoke us to to do Good in the world, and to do so much Good that we bring about the kin-dom of God for Good. This is what it means to Thrive!

Many of us are taught—through many a political ad—to vote for our own best interests. Jesus teaches us to serve for the interests of others. And serving others for their interests, means voting for their interests...and realizing that their interests are really “our interests” too. If the most vulnerable among us have food, water, shelter, reproductive rights, access to healthcare, etc...then guess what? We will too. If you care for those on the margins, on the outside of the circle, so to speak, that automatically already includes those in the center, those with power, those who already have seats at the table. It's not either/or. It's both/and.

The politics (and passion) of Jesus is service to and for people. So friends, whatever is in service of the Good of the most people, is the Good we must choose. It's okay if you feel some fear, James and John did too. But they took their fear— very humanly masked as a desire to guarantee their place,

privilege, and power—to Jesus. Which is what we must do too. And when we do, Jesus will redirect us just as he did James and John. Reminding us of a kind of politics that puts the needs of people above the power of people. Jesus always includes us in the Good News he is encouraging us embody. He may point out how we are missing the mark, but he never says, “You're out or you're fired! Just because we missed the mark.” He redirects, forgives, and redirects, time and time and time again.

The Good News of the Gospel is that the passion—the suffering, the sacrifice, and serving—it leads always, in some way, to Resurrection. To new life. To the new ways of being we imagine and dream and hope for our country and world.

And ultimately, this is the greatest hope of all. That just when we think all hope is lost and nothing is possible and everything is pointing toward death...Resurrection is waiting around the corner. New life. Second chances. Hope. It is always in our future. But the road to Resurrection doesn't come through the success of a few. It comes through the collective shared suffering of us

all, because we're all in this together. If we are the Body of Christ today, then we Suffer together and we Rise Together.

May *That* be the passion that drives us to the polls.

And, by the way, whatever happens on Election Day, remember this: no President is our Savior. We have one savior, Christ. And WE are all Christ's body, living today—suffering, dying, rising again and again again. Together.

May the love of Christ shape not just the values we vote for, but the values we live by. Each and every day. On November 5th. And November 6th. And November 7th, and every day that follows.

Amen.