

**“Race, Sex, and Politics”**  
**Luke 21:5-19; Psalm 82**

In the summer of 1971, I went to be co-director of a Salvation Army day camp in Harlem in New York City. To call this cultural shock would be a bit of an understatement. I had never lived and seldom visited above the Mason Dixon line. And, I had never been to New York City. And, of course, there was all the myth, mystery, and mayhem associated with the name Harlem.

Spending the night at my co-director’s house in New Jersey before venturing into the city, I picked up a copy of The New Yorker magazine, a publication not familiar to Kentucky residents. It contained an article on what it called the worst police station in America. Twenty-four hour police guards had been posted outside the station to prevent the drive by bombings. The station was around the corner from where I would be living.

The only element of this new residence and job that gave me some comfort was the knowledge that I was comfortable around black people. I went to school with African Americans, played church league basketball with them, refereed games between white and black teams, and played on the team coached by my next door neighbor when he integrated the town’s Little League by bringing on the first African American boy to play baseball. So, I believed I was prepared for this adventure.

But, a memory and life lesson that remains with me to this day occurred in my first week in Harlem. I lived on the fourth floor of the Salvation Army building on 125th Street. I had been down to 86<sup>th</sup> Street in the posh part of town, where the mayor lived, to visit my co-director. Around midnight, I took the subway back to my room.

At each stop between 86<sup>th</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> Streets, I noticed a significant change. My fellow riders went from a mixture of white and black to only black, except for me. All of a sudden, it struck me that everyone I could see, in my subway car, and the adjoining cars, were African American. There was a policeman, but he was also black, which made me wonder how motivated he would be to help me.

For the first time in my life, I was in the minority. Unlike being the poorest kid in your class, or the worst basketball player, this was a difference immediately visible to everyone. For the first time I experienced what it was like to be visibly, unmistakably different from everyone surrounding me. And I had no idea if these people who looked different from me would find that offensive, irritating, or threatening.

In many ways, America is at a turning point. We continue to divide by ethnicity, wealth, political ideas, or any other way that we differentiate ourselves from others. We often blame politicians for this. And that blame is surely justified as they have exploited

these differences for their political ambitions. But they have only been able to do this because we have allowed it, and often encouraged it.

Segregating ourselves into our own little tribes of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, education, etc., we are losing the desire to understand what it feels like to be a minority, to seek the experience of those different from us, to love one another, to be the Good Samaritan, to eat with tax collectors and sinners, like Jesus taught us.

As we begin a new year, I want to discuss three areas where people of faith, you and I, must begin to make a difference for the good of our country, for the future of our children, for our own spiritual lives.

This past fall, I was a participant in the Furman Riley Institute's Diversity Leadership Initiative. Most of the comments and information brought forth were not new to me. I was aware of the statistics concerning wage disparities between men and women, white, black and Hispanic. Like most of you, I have read about the racial imbalance in the prison population, studies revealing racial prejudice in hiring.

But what caught me completely off guard was to hear upper middle class African Americans, people who live in the same neighborhoods as you and me, drive the same cars, go to the same schools, do the same jobs, talk about how they train their teenage sons to act when stopped by the police. They teach them to put both hands on the steering wheel, make no sudden movements, and ask permission to reach for their registration and license. For African American parents, there is a great fear of a routine traffic stop turning into an act of violence.

Now, my guess is that all of you told your teenage son what I told mine: "Don't worry about the police stopping you. Your trouble is going to begin when you get home and have to face me." It never crosses our minds about the police harming our children. Yet, for people of color, statistics and the evening news reveal that this is a legitimate threat.

Now, please don't take this as a general condemnation of law enforcement. Brave young men and women in blue put their lives on the line every day. But, our tolerance of racial hatred, racial discrimination will manifest itself in all areas of our society, from our churches to those paid to protect us. At the highest levels of government and sometimes in our churches, racism is being greeted with a soft condemnation at best and a wink and a nod at worst.

Racism is a cancer on our society. It is contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is contrary to the American Constitution. It has, and will, sour everything from our schools to our businesses to our churches. It is time for people of faith, for you and me, to vociferously, relentlessly, and loudly declare racism as evil. And we must teach our

children this important biblical truth. Seeing and/or treating another human being as inferior is contrary to the divine creation, contrary to the will of Almighty God.

In Alan Paton's book, Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful, set in South Africa during apartheid, he records a conversation between a black person and a white person who both risked their lives fighting for racial justice. One of them notes that each of them bear scars for their effort. And the other replies, "Well, I look at it this way. When I get up there, the great judge will say, 'Where are your scars?' And if I haven't any, he will ask, 'Were there no causes worthy of getting scars?'"

In the Christian cause of racial justice, fairness, equality, where are our scars?

Second, the verbal and physical exploitation of women must be condemned in the strongest terms. Men and women are made in the image of God. As Christians, we see Christ in each person. Otherwise, men and women are equal partners in the Kingdom of God.

To be honest, the Christian Church does not have a great record when it comes to gender roles. Too often, when viewing males and females, it has tilted more toward the culture than the Bible. The good news is that elements of the Church have been at the forefront of gender equality, often dragging the rest of the Church kicking and screaming behind it.

The biblical truth is that men and women are equal in the sight of God. That doesn't deny biological differences. But those differences do not produce discrepancies in value, worth, ability, or control of their bodies and destinies.

I have to admit I have been stunned by the level of sexual abuse, harassment and violence that is now being revealed. Yet, when you ask women about their experiences, especially at work, you discover this exploitation is not all that unusual.

It is time for Christians, people of faith, to reaffirm in their own lives the value of all of God's children. We must teach our sons and daughters, and ourselves, that "No" means No. That no one possesses the right to make physical demands of another person. That no gender is superior, or inferior, to the other. That the hopes, dreams, aspirations, abilities, and goals of women are just as important as those of men. It is time for people of faith to be role models in how men and women interact at work, at home, and at church.

The year is 2028 and the United States has just elected the first woman as President of the United States, and she is from Alabama! A few days after the election, the president-elect calls her father in Alabama and asks, "So, Dad, I assume you will be coming to my inauguration?"

"I don't think so. It's a long drive; your mom isn't as young as she used to be, we'll have the dog with us, and my arthritis is acting up in my knee."

“Don’t worry about it, Dad, I’ll send Air Force One to pick you up and take you home, and a limousine will get you at your door,” she said.

“I don’t know. Everybody will be so fancy. What would your mother wear?”

“Oh, Dad,” she replied, “I’ll make sure she has a wonderful gown custom-made by one of the best designers in N.Y.”

“Honey,” Dad complained, “You know we can’t eat those rich foods you and your friends like to eat.”

The President-elect responded, “Don’t worry, Dad. The entire affair is going to be handled by the best caterer in D.C. And I’ll ensure your meals are salt-free.”

So her parents reluctantly agreed, and on January 20, 2029 arrived to see their daughter sworn in as President of the United States. The parents of the new President are seated in the front row. The President’s dad sees that a Senator is sitting next to him and leans over and whispers, “You see that woman up there with her hand on the Bible, becoming President of the United States?”

The Senator whispered in reply, “Yes, sir, I sure do. You must be very proud.”

“I am,” the Dad says proudly, “Her brother played football for Alabama.”

Gender equality begins at home.

Third, it is time for our faith to have a say in our personal politics. In the December 18<sup>th</sup> edition of the Presbyterian Outlook, Christopher Edmonston, pastor of White Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, wrote an article entitled, “*Pastoring a Purple Church*,” one filled with both Democrats and Republicans. He told about inviting the Governor of North Carolina, a Democrat and an elder and for more than twenty years a member of his congregation, to speak on the opioid epidemic in North Carolina. No press was present. And the governor spoke during the Sunday School hour. Steering away from anything political, the governor shared that he was serving on the President’s opioid task force, valuing the health of people over any political divisions. Edmonston writes that afterwards, while he received a few emails of praise, he still received one entitled “Leaving White Memorial.”

I believe it can safely be said that we now value politics over faith. When given a choice between a person of Christian principles or someone who agrees with our politics, we are increasingly choosing politics. The manipulation of religion for personal political goals or power is likely as old as humanity itself. Which is all the more reason for us to resist it. The Bible constantly warns us about the pursuit of money and power over God.

We have witnessed the emergence of a corrosive political environment. At its heart rests a belief that I am right and anybody who does not agree with me is wrong and must

be rejected. This arrogance has clouded our vision, produced leaders whose allegiance is to political party, and drawn us into positions refusing compromise, or even discussion.

Questions such as:

Do we want our children to breathe clean air and drink clean water?

Do we want all of God's children to have access to health care?

Do we want people everywhere to be fed and have shelter?

These should not be hard questions for people of faith to answer. We may differ in how to realize these goals, but people committed to achieving them will find a way to compromise and move forward.

From every political position I hear people talk about rights. But I never hear anyone speak about responsibility.

You may believe it is your *right* to a tax cut, but what is your *responsibility* to infrastructure, health care for the poor, military families?

You may believe it is your *right* to Social Security, Medicare, or a larger defense budget, but what is your *responsibility* for the federal deficit?

You may believe it is your *right* to own a gun. But what is your *responsibility* to keep them out of the hands of those who should not have that right?

You may believe it is your *right* to decide what to do with your body. But what is your *responsibility* to the unborn?

You may believe it is your *right* to demand rights for the unborn. But what is your *responsibility* to the already born – medical insurance for the poor, adequate food for the hungry, childcare for the indigent.

You may believe it is your *right* to run your business as you please. But what is your *responsibility* to your employees about fair wages and benefits?

You may believe people have a *right* to affordable health care. But what is your *responsibility* when it comes to paying more taxes to fund that?

There, I tried to step on everyone's toes. If I left you out, see me afterwards, I'm sure I can come up with something just for you.

These issues are not Democrat, Republican, Independent, liberal, or conservative. They speak to basic Christian values – the worth of every single person as a child of God and our responsibility as Christians in building the kingdom of God.

As Christians, we acknowledge our sinfulness, our imperfections. This basic confession enables us to see that we are not always right, that sometimes we make bad choices, which means we are open to hearing other suggestions. Understanding our own inadequacies, we decide to work with others, to hear the views of those with whom we disagree, always in the context of asking ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" *That* is Christian leadership.

Anthony De Mello, an Indian Jesuit priest and psychotherapist, in his book, The Song of the Bird, tells about the devil going for a walk with a friend. They saw a man ahead of them stoop down and pick up something from the ground. “What did that man find?” asked the friend.

“A piece of Truth,” replied the devil.

“Doesn’t that disturb you?” asked the friend.

“No,” said the devil, “I shall let him make a belief out of it.”

Whatever our political or religious affiliations, we all possess a piece of truth. But we will only be able to see all the truth, and act on it, when we turn to each other and put the pieces together.

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We often forget that Jesus dealt with these issues all the time. Race – a Samaritan helping a Jew. Sex – preventing the stoning of the woman taken in adultery. Politics – eating with government tax collectors.

The struggles of race, sex, and politics are not new. Nor are the consequences of ignoring them. Staring with creation, right up through Jesus and the Apostle Paul, the Bible is very clear concerning each and every human being having been made in the very image of God. Therefore each and every human being is to be loved, nurtured, fed, clothed, cared for, and treated as if he or she was God. The kingdom of God, God’s plan for humanity will only come when we decide those very principles of love, justice, respect, and responsibility must, and will be spoken, lived, and voted through each one of us.

Today, are you ready to begin?

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