



How to Disagree without the Vitriol

2 Timothy 2:20-26

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

February 21, 2024

When I sat down last September to plan out worship for the coming year, I got through the end of December and made the turn into January. That's always a hard transition in the planning process ... thinking about the new year, because in many ways, it invites an understanding of what does not yet exist. What's going to be important sixth months from now? What will we need to be discussing from a faith or discipleship perspective next year?

In that process, I remember typing out the dates in the worship planning spreadsheet that Kyle and Ann Cary and I share. January 7, 2024. January 14, 2024. ... January 2024. ... By the time I had finished typing out the first few dates, the reality of the year hit me.

2024.

20 ... 24.

2024 is not an insignificant year. If we schedule out a bit further than January, we find that Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day (nothing says I love you like an ashy forehead); it's a leap year; and, Easter falls in March, which hasn't happened in 7 years. But, perhaps more importantly, as the Iowa Caucuses have already signaled, 2024 is a general election year.

The general election is preceded by months of primaries, debates (maybe?), and an obscene amount of spending on political ads and campaign statements. If this year's election follows suit, we will recall that the last few general elections were marked by heated contention, fueled by foreign and domestic bots inciting hatred and vitriol through social media, and by PACs and politicians blasting the "other side's" approach to hot-button topics.

I've had a number of conversations with you all over the past two general elections about the challenges of engaging faithfully with friends, neighbors, coworkers, family, and even other church members around political issues where there seems to be great disagreement. In our private conversations, we've discussed some of the more common topics that are centered in a general election campaign.

As I was praying through what would be the best way to transition into 2024, it felt like there was no better focus for the start of the year than to prepare ourselves for the political-ness that will define the next 10 months. Though there is a common desire to leave politics out of the pulpit for many churches, I felt a nudging from the divine that suggested the best way to engage faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ in 2024 would not be to ignore the political landscape of

our immediate future, but to discern how we might better engage in that landscape as disciples of Jesus Christ. How do we view political issues through a Biblical and faithful lens?

After succumbing to the Spirit and titling the worship series, “Let’s Get Political,” I then spent *a lot more time* trying to decide which political topics I could address without facing a congregational coup. ... The reality is, a number of the major topics that circulate in general elections are absent from the Biblical story. To form an opinion on some topics is to take some liberty in applying the Bible to our modern concerns. Not that applying the Bible to modern issues is wrong, I think we’re always trying to discern how the Bible, and its teachings on faithful living, guide us in the midst of modern challenges. And let’s be honest, I take this approach most weeks in my sermon planning. But, knowing the tension that surrounds *political* topics, I wanted to focus on issues the Bible more directly addresses.

My intention is not to espouse a certain partisan perspective, though, it is possible that what I say may sound like it correlates more with one party or the other. And that may change from week to week, depending on the topic. My intention is to pull from the Biblical text, highlighting how each topic was addressed in the Biblical era, 2000-6000 years ago, and then to invite us to consider how we might engage in that topic faithfully today.

Ultimately, my hope is to prepare you to engage in political conversations this year with a greater confidence as disciples and as a community of Christ – a people of faith sustained by a Biblical witness.

Because political conversation is my primary goal, it felt like the best place to start was with our relationships. *How do we disagree without the vitriol?*

The partisan dissonance is perhaps the greatest of challenges for us as a nation today, and I would imagine that it weighs in each of our personal lives and in many of our relationships. It’s hard to be in a healthy relationship with anyone (family, friends, or neighbor,) when your perspective on major social issues are so opposite the other. And, let’s be honest, few of us *aren’t* opinionated on at least a few of our modern social issues. I cannot name them all, but to be clear, the kinds of issues I’m referencing are things like marriage equality, gun control, immigration, bodily autonomy, voting rights, religious freedoms, racial equity, and climate change. A difference in any one of these social concerns is enough to challenge our dialogue with another, but holding opposing views on multiple issues? For some, that’s a non-starter. Is a relationship even possible?

Our Biblical text is filled with examples of these kinds of social struggles. The Gospels offer a lengthy narrative account of Jesus teaching and working amongst a people who held firm beliefs around (things like) gender roles, immigration, empirical power, and perhaps most centrally, religious expectations. Jesus spends a good deal of his time rubbing up against those social norms and challenging the beliefs that were cemented in the community. I could have used any one of the examples of how Jesus pushed against those norms in his ministry for this morning’s text, but instead, I opted to go with 2 Timothy.

The letters to Timothy were written about 30-40 years after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. The letters are attributed to Paul, and were written to offer guidance to Timothy as a young leader in the early church. Along with the letter Titus, 1st and 2nd Timothy are often called "The Pastorals," because they are giving guidance as to how one might lead faithfully as a pastor in the new Christian church.

Timothy was leading the early church beyond the region of Judea. He was engaged in birthing new faith communities and pastoring groups of new Christian converts in the midst of the Roman empire, which, as an empire, was not a huge fan of this new Christian movement. The instructions offered throughout Paul's letters make it clear, these early Christians were not to assimilate to the Roman ideals. Part of their very identity was to stand in clear opposition to the abusive powers and practices of the Roman elite. It is this connection, this invitation to be faithful to Christ in the midst of an society that doesn't always appreciate Christian views, that leads me to 2 Timothy.

This particular text opens with an assumption of understanding. The author writes, "In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary." The majority of the early church was not among the wealthy in Rome. It would have been unlikely that any of the church members whom Timothy was pastoring would have had multiple sets of cutlery. Scholar Raymond Collins writes, "the vast majority of the population in Hellenistic cities were slaves." Yet, even if they did not own multiple sets, Collins continues, "Household slaves would be quite familiar with the variety of utensils used by their masters."ⁱ

I don't know about you, but I do have a "special" silver set of cutlery. If I remember correctly, it was passed down to us from one of Jen's family members. We don't use it ... um, well, I would say we don't use it very often, but that's not really true. We just don't use it. I'm not sure I remember the last time that cutlery box was opened. Perhaps you have a similar set?

The author says that anyone who cleanses themselves of the things he has mentioned will become like these special utensils – dedicated and useful, ready for every good work.

Two things must be clarified here: in the author's understanding, the special utensils were not used like mine. They didn't only come out once every couple of years for a singular grand occasion. The culture into which the author is speaking held "special" gatherings with some regularity. They would likely pull out the special cutlery anytime they had guests over, which would have been fairly often, perhaps even multiple times a week. The imagery offered suggests that, metaphorically speaking, we might be put to use as the fine cutlery on even a daily basis.

But there is a caveat. To be used as such fine cutlery, we must cleanse ourselves of the things the author had previously mentioned. If we back up just a few verses, starting in verse 14, we will find the author telling Timothy to warn people to avoid wrangling over words, which "does

no good but only ruins those who are listening.” He also says they should “avoid profane chatter.” ... If we’re going to become the fine cutlery, used for every good work, we have to cleanse ourselves of poor communication; or communication that might be defined as detrimental to communal well-being.

That same concern, which was offered in verses 14-19, will be echoed as we keep reading in verses 22-26, which begins, “Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”

The author doesn’t define youthful passions, but it’s clear they are perceived in a pejorative way. “Youths are presumed to be unable to control their passions.” There is an insistence here that we do not get carried away with our own interests and passions, but instead, that we “seek out the interests of the gospel – righteousness, faith, love, and peace.”ⁱⁱ

In this four-fold invitation, righteousness is a general moral condition as it relates to the call of God in the world; faith marks our relationship with God; love speaks to our relationship with others; and peace speaks to the greater and eternal shalom of creation. “The behavioral principle embedded here is that the constant rekindling of these graces will tend gradually to extinguish corruptions of will and passion.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The author is inviting us to turn from selfish ways and individual certainty to focus on the greater health of the community. And there’s a clear indication that how we communicate with one another is central in that work.

Let’s keep reading in verse 23: “Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.”

Now, if you’re paying close attention, you might notice that this text doesn’t say you have to *agree* with someone else’s opinion. In fact, the text offers quite the opposite – it says that as the Lord’s servant, you should be an apt teacher, patient, and *correcting opponents* with gentleness. This caveat will always leave room for challenging relationships, because if you and the person with whom you disagree both believe that your side is “right,” there may be no convincing the other they are wrong. But the author doesn’t seem to think it is our job to convince the other they are wrong; it is simply our job to avoid senseless controversies, and when we do engage for corrective or teaching purposes, to do so with gentleness and patience.

In fact, in the very next verse we find out whose job it is to change someone’s mind. The author continues, “God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”

Again, any one of us is likely to approach this text with the belief that, on any of the hot button topics, we are the one who is offering a corrective teaching, and that it is the other who may need to be convinced by God to repent that they may come to know the truth. Certainly the

author and, as his student, Timothy, had a pretty firm grasp on what they believed was right and wrong – faithful and unfaithful. And, without doubt, many of us do today as well.

The text does not promise us that quarrels will not exist, or that if we live faithfully enough we can avoid disagreements with others around significant social issues. No. That's the promise of the Gospel.

What the Gospel does offer, as is clear from this teaching in Timothy, and what we might glean as we head into this general election year, is that if we cannot avoid anger in our speech, or the use of profane words, or engaging in senseless controversies, or maintaining a youthful stubbornness in our own positions, or even just quarreling with others, then we are a stumbling block to God's work in the world. Quite the opposite, we are called to engage faithfully, with righteousness, faith, love, and peace, and to share in the work of God, who will be the one to lead us all in the path of discipleship.

May God lead us in the year to come, to hold fast to our faith even as we engage with gentleness and patience in challenging conversations with those who differ from us in opinion and thought, that we might be part of God's work of creating peace in the world. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Raymond F. Collins. *I & II Timothy and Titus, A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long. *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas C. Oden. *First and Second Timothy and Titus, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.