

Your Political Pastor – a sermon on Matthew 16:21-28 & Romans 12:9-21

preached by Pastor Mark Harris for the First Church in Jaffrey on August 30th, 2026

Please pray with me: Jesus, you counsel us to love our neighbor, but have you heard them talk? Grant me the strength to disagree, but with words of compassion. Grant me the wisdom to love my neighbor, even though I can't stand their bumper stickers. Amen

Well, it had to happen sometime, and we may as well get it out of the way. It's time we got political. By the end of today's sermon, I hope you know who you're going to vote for, what policies and bills you should support, and which political party you need to switch your registration to. Separation of church and state is all very well, but to be a part of my church, you're going to need to toe the line!

Where should we start? With that introduction, I would hope that at least some of you would start by showing me the door.

Here is where I will start: I drink wine. Hardly a political opinion, unless you're in the deep south, with its surviving blue laws and its dry counties. Also, I'm not really revealing anything. Some of you have seen my grocery cart, and others have opened beers for me. I bring it up because, when I was in Columbia, in much more conservative Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, it could be an issue. My church was fine with it, though, so it presented no difficulty. I did, however, dress in my collar much more frequently in Pennsylvania, for events and such. The rule I made for myself then was this: I will not purchase alcohol while in my collar.

This was not any sort of nod to others' more conservative beliefs on consumption. I made the rule because I have many friends who are in recovery from addiction. In respect for this, I decided that the optics of appearing in the community formally, in uniform, and purchasing alcohol for my personal consumption could have potentially negative impacts. The last thing that I would want is to have someone in recovery observe me doing something like that, and then deciding that if it's okay for me, then it's okay for them too. Let me not be a stumbling block to my sibling. This personal choice is not meant as any sort of criticism upon others in traditions in

which showing up formally and consuming alcohol is normal, like in some Catholic Parishes. It's my own choice.

Especially when I am clearly identifiable as a Pastor, I want to do my best to express and uphold ideals. I'm big enough to admit that my own relationship with alcohol has not always been the healthiest. This should not be a surprise when you remember that I spent much of my life in the restaurant industry and was also in the US Navy. So, while this self-imposed policy may not be abstinence, it is an expression that I can wait until later to get my bottle of Chardonnay, and don't have such a need that I must do it in a collar.

Another place that this idea shows up for me is in politics. A group from my Seminary called me before the 2024 election and asked me to join them in promoting specific candidates seeking local office in Columbia, and I refused. Whether I wore a collar or not, I was recognizable in that community as a religious leader. As such, I do not believe that it's my place to tell people who to vote for. While I respected these peoples' choice to do so, and also respect people like Senator Raphael Warnock and others who operate in both the religious and political spheres, I have chosen differently. I was asked, while in Columbia, to fill out the Democratic ticket for local elections, and refused.

As a Pastor, I see it as my job to press for principles and ideals. To take a specific subject, let's explore immigration. Currently, we live under a Presidential Administration that has taken a hard line view on immigration. Deportations are up, and the tactics used to achieve this are seen as less than humane by many. I can completely understand why many feel the need to take political action to push against this set of policy priorities.

Again, let me say that I affirm everyone's right to interpret Scripture in their own way. There have been many Scriptural references brought up in our national debate on immigration on both sides. For my own part, my position is quite simple. As I read Scripture, there should be no borders.

I feel quite confident in my ability to defend that position Scripturally. Try me. I don't feel at all confident that I could defend that position politically, or even practically. As far as that latter point goes, I don't care. I am not writing legislation nor rallying votes. I am preaching and caring for our community. I am not bound by political realities, nor the need to be re-elected. I am free to interpret and to preach and allow others to move slowly towards progress on this issue. As far as the political realm goes, I am very happy to have the exact same power and influence as

most of my parishioners. I will vote, and I will express my position to those who want to hear it.

We are quickly nearing the mid-term elections, and the smell of anxiety in the air is more prominent than I think I have ever witnessed this time. There are conspiracy theories and real substantive fears and a whole, whole lot of people talking very loudly about how terrible the people on the other side are. These realities concern me even more than the outcomes in November. We are angrily and feverishly demonizing each other with a vengeance that is reminding some of those in our country of the time just before the Civil War, and others of Germany in the late Weimar Republic.

The loudest voices on both sides are inevitably the most extreme, and they are both clearly calling their opponents un-American, anti-democratic, and even evil. And the cumulative effect of this rhetoric is exactly what it is meant to be. It is the drowning out of more moderate and reasonable voices on both sides. It is meant to force everyone further from the middle and into the camps of those who are sharpening their swords and plotting their revenge upon those who oppose them. Let me be clear, this method is meant to send a very clear message: if you don't agree with us 100%, then shut up.

While I can honestly tell you that I am pretty far out on one end of the spectrum myself, I will say this. I don't think we will get anywhere peacefully or prosperously with this kind of rhetoric and vitriol. And I absolutely will not shut up about that. Civil discourse is critical to a working democracy, and we need desperately to revive it for the sake of our past, present, and future.

Two anecdotes. I am a part of group called a Community of Practice in the Keystone Conference of the UCC. This is a small group of Pastors who meet monthly to vent, support, and discuss. In our last meeting, one of our number brought up an incident that happened on her church's Facebook page. A parishioner reposted a meme that read 'ICE out of Carlisle.' Others in her church complained, and the man took it down, but damage was done. It bears saying at this point that while I have laughed at and enjoyed many memes I have seen on social media, not one of them has ever come close to changing my mind on any subject.

When the Pastor spoke with the man who had posted this meme, he explained that his sister had a friend who had gone to his scheduled appointment with Immigration and Naturalization only to be placed in handcuffs and taken to detention. This man was a doctor who had a family in the community and did a great deal of charitable work. This is what spurred him to re-post someone else's meme.

I made the point that he would likely have gotten a completely different response if he had simply written about what he had personally experienced. Even from people who are for increased deportation, this personal story might well spur them to call their representatives in government and urge compassion and restraint in their actions. Memes reinforce rhetoric. Personal anecdotes make issues relatable and encourage compassion.

When I was working at the UCC in Keene, I heard a story from the then Pastor, Gordon Ellis, may he feast well at God's table. He told me the history of an active couple in the church who had presented him with many problems when he first arrived. He was notably progressive, and they were much less so, and didn't care for him. They undertook a campaign of overt and covert action against him. They were mean, nasty, underhanded, and inappropriate. He did his best not to respond but he was sorely vexed.

Then, their son committed suicide. In their profound pain and grief, Gordon showed up. He brought them compassion, kindness, and care, and stuck by their sides through the unimaginable anguish and slow process of recovery which could only ever be incomplete. They remained faithful and caring church members thereafter.

I want to be like Gordon. I want to argue with you about politics, and have you call me when you have a flat tire. And besides all of the day-to-day difficulties, let's face facts. If it hasn't already happened, then it will soon. Someone will get a terrible phone call. Someone will receive a diagnosis. Someone's marriage will fall apart, child will become addicted, friend will turn their back, beloved pet will be run over. Someone will get arrested. This is life, we're living. No one gets through it unscathed. And that is why I'm here. Please, please, please put me on your call list. I don't need to be your first call, of course. But let me know. We don't even have to talk about it, but let me be ready to be there with you, silent if you prefer.

So now you know. Now you have the answers. You should vote and advocate and register as your conscience dictates. And you should put me on your call list because I want to be there for you.

Amen