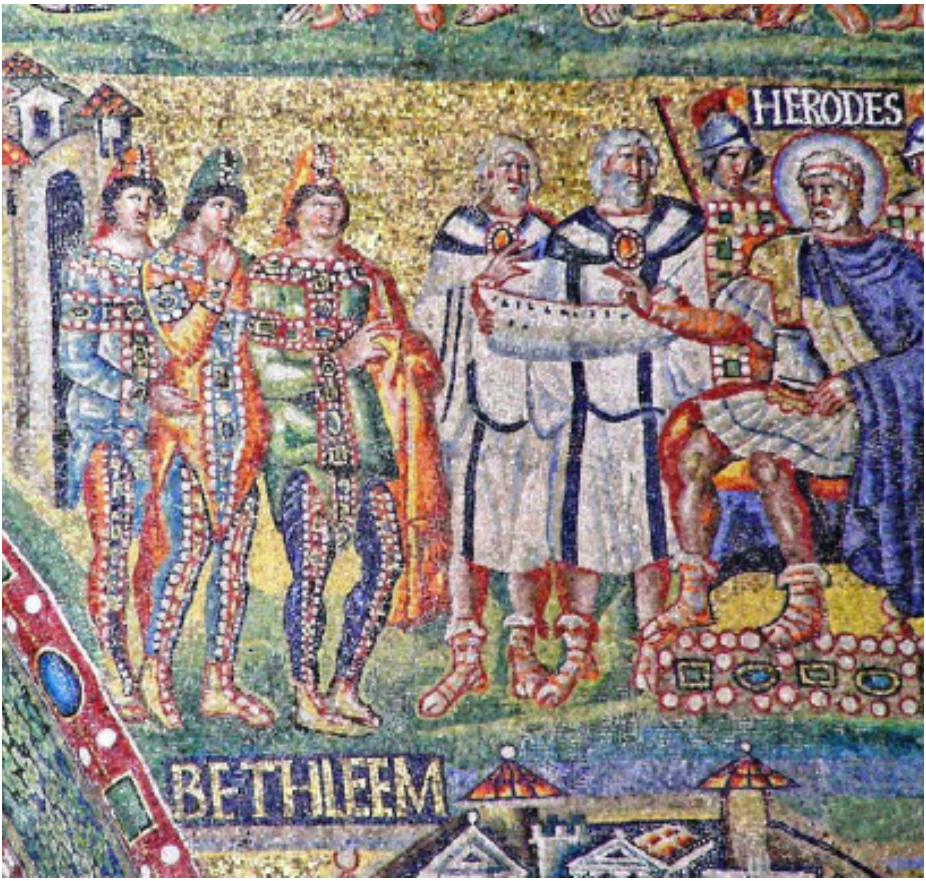
Let's Talk About Church & State



A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston
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This morning marks the start of a new sermon series at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. We have entitled this series "The Next America."

In the next chapter of its history, this country will face a number of important challenges. Our goal is to mine the wisdom of our faith for spiritual guidance as, collectively, our country seeks to understand and respond to these challenges.

Over the next eight Sundays, the clergy of this church are going to talk about guns, race, mental health, economic opportunity, addiction, climate change and immigration. Many of these topics were suggested by members of this congregation. As we begin this new series, I have set myself three tasks:

1. To provide a rationale for the sermon series.
2. To talk about the relationship between the church and the state.
3. To make concrete suggestions about how we can have conversations about "The Next America" in a way that is consistent with our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It's a tall order. Let's get to work.

Part 1: A Rationale

A member of this congregation recently said to me, "The church shouldn't dabble in politics."

The concern embedded in her comment is legitimate. Politics is a messy business. When clergy endorse a political candidate, or when churches choose to salute the platform of a political party, they place their faith in an imperfect vessel. All political figures (and all political movements) sooner or later betray the values that people of faith hold dear.

When this happens—when human sin manifests in our leaders—people of faith often look to the church for guidance. If a church has become entangled in party politics, its guidance tends to carry more partisan bias than sacred wisdom.

We see this, of course, in our own lives. We are skilled at explaining away the moral failings of those we support politically: "This fellow may be flawed, but he is God's chosen leader!" And then, with the same pair of lips, we gleefully (I mean "sadly" and "soberly") pronounce religious judgement on our political foes: "This senator's behaviors and policies make me wonder if she might be the antichrist."

Far too often, hypocrisy is the only winner when churches declare their loyalty to party politics!

Fortunately, our tradition has an antidote. It encourages people of faith to keep a vigilant eye on their priorities and loyalties. This is, of course, the very first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God. Thou shalt have no other god before me!"

The faithful should never walk into church hoping to find a place where they can stick their heads in the sand.

The Bible is clear. Communities of faith should not subordinate their unique calling to a political agenda—no matter how compelling or seemingly congruent. We must not bow down to any god but God!

This raises an interesting question: If churches should avoid endorsing fallible politicians, should we also avoid making comment on the moral and ethical issues that are being debated by politicians? Should the church stay away? Stay silent?

Here, I think, an important distinction can be made. Engaging topics that matter—topics that are controversial and about which there is a strong difference of opinion in the wider society—is not the same thing as becoming entangled in partisan politics.

I am a firm believer in this simple premise: *If people are talking about an issue out there, we ought to be talking about it in here*. This premise

comes with two basic ground rules. First, the church should provide a respite from toxic rhetoric and endless partisan blame games. Second, the faithful should never walk into church hoping to find a place where they can stick their heads in the sand.

In other words:

- Yes, things are different here. But...
- No, you cannot escape the world here.

These two principles work in sacred tandem. We all want (and need) to be freed from toxic politics. But the best way to put toxic politics behind us is not through isolation. The best way to heal people's spirits and foster change in God's world is for the church to model an alternative—an approach to addressing difficult and important matters with grace and humility.

Over the next two months, the clergy of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church are going to take up this challenge.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew. It is the classic text for Epiphany Sunday and the perfect passage for the start of this series.

> *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*
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> *"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'*
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> *Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where*

the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Matthew 2:1-18

Part 2: Church and State

What is the right relationship between the church and the state? This is a complicated and important question. Scores of books have been written on this subject. To take a cursory run at the subject this morning, let's make a quick survey of both 1) what our tradition has to say, and 2) what the American Constitution has to say.

Let's start with the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Bible describes dozens of fascinating interactions between people of faith and political figures. Moses, famously, walks right up to his old friend Pharaoh and delivers God's command, "Let my people go!" Nathan, a priest and prophet, calls out King David for committing both adultery and murder. Esther prepares a fabulous dinner for King Ahasuerus and

convinces him to save all the Jews in Persia from extermination. The prophet Jeremiah declares God's judgment against the government of his time.

Scripture does not provide us with a cookie-cutter approach to church/state relations.

John the Baptist criticizes King Herod's philandering ways. As a thank you, Herod has John beheaded. Jesus speaks with Pontius Pilate about the nature of truth. When the conversation is finished, the Roman governor sentences Christ to torture and death. "He suffered under Pontius Pilate." In the Book of Romans, Paul argues that it is a Christian's obligation to obey earthly rulers. Paul claims that civil rulers are put into their leadership positions by God. Later in the Bible, the book of Revelation comes to the opposite conclusion. It argues that some earthly rulers are minions of the devil.

What are we to do with the diversity of perspectives that Scripture offers in regard to the interactions between church and state?

First, we should be honest. Scripture does not provide us with a cookie-cutter approach to church/state relations. At times, the Bible describes people of faith as dutiful citizens, people trying to be loyal subjects in the God-sponsored rule of the state. And at times, the Bible describes people of faith as devout critics of corrupt governments. These individuals are often persecuted for speaking out against the state.

Can we find guidance in this diversity? I think we can. In fact, Scripture's diversity itself provides a sort of guidance. When you think about it, it makes sense that the interactions between people of faith

and the state vary according to historical context and the individuals involved. In other words, our role, as the church in this world, is to study our tradition and to engage in prayerful discernment and conversation about what the most faithful path is (what the Spirit is calling us to do) right now.

I would offer a caveat here. This is difficult. These issues are hot topics for a reason. There is a lot at stake when it comes to setting a direction for this country on these matters. Prayerful discernment, good intentions and earnest conversation on the part of the faithful do not guarantee success. Scripture is clear on this point: When faith and the state come into conflict, the results can turn ugly—very ugly.

In today's passage the Magi—star gazers from the East—come looking for "the King of the Jews." This news threatens the current holder of that royal title: King Herod. A crafty political incumbent, Herod summons the Magi to his palace. Over tea and biscuits, Herod asks his visitors when they first saw the star in the sky. They tell him. They share intelligence that Herod will remember. He plans to use their devotion for his own nefarious purposes. He lies to the Magi. "My scribes tell me that the child you seek will be born in Bethlehem. Would you do me a favor? When you find the baby, let me know. I'd like to worship him, too."

The Magi do find Jesus and worship him, but Matthew tells us that they do not obey Herod. God warns them not to share any additional information that would assist the king in identifying the child. Instead, the star gazers slip by Herod's palace and return to their homes by another road.

This, of course, is not the end of the story.

On learning that the Magi have tricked him, Herod flies into a fury. He commands his soldiers to kill every child under two years old in the city of Bethlehem. Our tradition calls this terrible event "The Slaughter of the Innocents." I spared you a bulletin cover depicting this scene, but the artwork does exist. More than a few ancient churches have a mosaic or fresco that depicts the murder of these children. These paintings provide church-goers with a grim reminder of the price the faithful can pay when they defy earthly powers and principalities.

This story stands as a reminder to us, too. As people of faith, we should never be so naïve as to assume we have put scenes like the slaughter in Bethlehem behind us.

In 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, was arrested by the Gestapo in Germany for his staunch and vocal opposition to Hitler's genocidal persecution of European Jews. Bonhoeffer was declared "an enemy of the state." Eventually he was transferred from prison to the concentration camp in Flossenbürg. Then, in April of 1945, German police discovered Bonhoeffer's name in the diary of Hans von Dohnányi—a man who participated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. On learning this, Hitler ordered Bonhoeffer (and everyone else named in the diary) killed. Bonhoeffer was hanged two weeks before American forces arrived to liberate the camp.

To many, Bonhoeffer is a modern saint—a martyr—a person who paid the ultimate price for his faith. He spoke out against the evils of National Socialism. He associated with people who were working to destabilize the government of his time and plotting to kill Germany's political leader.

An avowed pacifist, Bonhoeffer struggled mightily with these decisions. In prison, he wrote that he did not consider himself to be an innocent man. Yet Bonhoeffer also felt he made the only faithful choice available to him in terms of opposing the evils of the Nazi State.

Some of humanity's most beloved heroes are martyrs like Bonhoeffer, people whose faith encouraged them to speak out against a state's tyranny and corruption. One of the brilliant and, I think, hopeful things about America is that our Constitution provides protections for this sort of speech. When the framers sat down to write the Constitution, they were keenly aware that many of the people who moved to America came fleeing religious persecution in their homelands. The framers provided protections for the free exercise of religion in our establishing documents.

To be clear, and this is a common mistake, the words "separation of church and state" do not occur in the Constitution. This phrase first pops up in our national discourse in a letter Thomas Jefferson sent to an association of Baptist ministers in Danbury, Connecticut, in 1802. In this letter, Jefferson assures a group of pastors that the newly formed United States will be different (less controlling, less oppressive) than the European countries many of them fled. He promises that the government will not undertake to tell people what religion they should (or should not) exercise.

The "Establishment" and "Free Exercise" clauses of the Constitution explicitly address these concerns. They prevent the government

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from trying to control people's faith. They prohibit the government from establishing any religion as the official faith of the land. They safeguard people's freedom to exercise their faith, or to have no faith at all.

In all this, the Constitution never tries to muzzle faithful people or religious communities when it comes to participating in public discourse. On the contrary, the Constitution protects the right of the faithful to speak out.

This seems wise on so many levels. The important issues—topics of concern regarding the direction of this society—are never simply political. Our hot topics have legal, ethical, medical, economic and spiritual ramifications. If we are to make progress dealing with the most conflicted and challenging issues facing our country, we need all of these perspectives—including the voices of the faithful—at the table.

Part 3: How to Talk to Each Other

I want to close today with a recommendation as to how we might talk to one other and to the wider society about controversial issues—issues that are so important to the life and direction of our country. I suggest that we strive to shape our thinking and praying and debating according to four classic Christian virtues: Faith, Hope, Love and Humility.

In these conversations, we need Faith.

Faith grounds us in who God is. Faith pushes other gods to the side

and grounds our being—our thoughts and our actions—in the Author of all that is. Faith is our journey, our quest to have a deep and abiding relationship with God. Faith is not self-assured certainty, but what happens in our hearts when we place our trust, first and foremost, in God's guidance and God's care.

In these conversations, we need Hope.

Hope is the song we sing when we realize that the world as it is, in all its messy awfulness, doesn't measure up to the world as imagined by God. Hope is not pie-in-the-sky wistful thinking. It is realistic without being defeatist. It is the flutter in our hearts that pushes back against cynicism.

Hope is the energy that propels us forward. It is that surprising strength that enables us to reach toward God's vision even when darkness surrounds us. Hope is the virtue that ungirds all our efforts to heal and console, to nurture and reconcile this broken world.

Faith, hope, love and humility.

In these conversations, we need Love.

Love is the ethic that enables us to hold on to each other even when the going gets tough. Jesus calls us to love God, to love ourselves, to love our neighbors, and even, to love our enemies. Love is Christ's most difficult command.

When the faithful wrestle with difficult issues, we cannot pay lip service to love. It must seep from our speech. It must coat our every word. If we cannot speak out of love, we would be well-advised, as Christians, to stay silent. Without love, says the Apostle Paul, we are a noisy gong. Without love we are a clanging cymbal. In tackling challenging issues, we must embrace the virtue Jesus exemplified every day of his life. We must embody love.

In these conversations, we need Humility.

In our country, humility is the virtue in shortest supply. Humility requires setting aside the almighty ego—the conviction that we know all, that our gut is right, that our anger is pure and that those who disagree with us are either evil or stupid.

Humility does not ask us to become an unopinionated worm. On the contrary, humility is the virtue that would have us work hard—reading and studying and praying about an issue—because we do not assume that our first, knee-jerk opinion about an issue represents the truth.

Humility is decentering. It respects the other as much as the self. Humility acknowledges that complex issues are complex for a reason. Easy answers are probably incomplete answers. Humility is the willingness to listen. Humility searches other people's opinions for truth.

Humility is something we see in the person of Christ. The little light the Magi knelt before is also the incarnate Word, who humbled himself, taking on our human form and being nailed to a cross.

Faith, hope, love and humility. These virtues compel us to take up topics that matter, *and* they will shape the way we engage them. These virtues form the core of the wisdom that the Christian community has to offer to the world in this contentious time.

Faith, hope, love and humility provide an alternative to the swirl of vitriol that awaits us most days out there. They absolutely have the potential to change the game.

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