

Mark L. Haas
Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church
10.11.20

Good morning. It is my pleasure to be with you today.

Our New Testament reading comes from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, verses 24-30

²⁴ Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' ²⁸ He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

"This is the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God."

I come to you as a political scientist and as a Christian.

My goal is to share with you some major worries that I have about the trajectory of our politics and how our faith can help mitigate some of the problems we are confronting.

And I want to discuss how our greatest president, Abraham Lincoln, can serve as a model for how we might apply our faith to politics in a constructive way.

I must say, whenever I thought about delivering this sermon I did so with some apprehension. Discussing both politics and religion in today's climate. What could possibly go wrong? Well here goes.

The political issue that worries me greatly is the nature of the increasingly polarization between Republicans and Democrats.

All democracies have some level of political polarization, meaning the separation of individuals into different parties.

But polarization in the United States in recent years has both increased in intensity and transformed into a different type.

These change, in my view, are very dangerous for the future of the Republic.

Political polarization is always to some extent **issue based**: different individuals have different political priorities and different solutions to political problems.

People who agree on political ends and means tend to coalesce in a party and in opposition to other parties that advocate different political ends and means.

Issue-based polarization has dominated US politics for most of America's existence, and certainly for my life time.

Issue-based polarization allows for compromise among parties as groups negotiate over such things as more or less taxation or more or less governmental regulation.

A different and much more destructive type of polarization has, however, come to dominate US politics in recent years.

Instead of issue based, polarization today is increasingly identity based.

Identity-based polarization occurs when people emotionally attach themselves to a group and remain reflexively loyal to it.

At these times, individuals' self worth and who they believe themselves to be are closely tied to the success of their party.

When identity based polarization occurs, issues take a back seat.

In fact, leaders of a party can repudiate long-standing beliefs and goals and still be supported.

The success of one's party and the defeat of the other are what matter, the issues are secondary.

Why does this shift from issue-based to identity-based polarization matter?

It is a well-established social-psychological phenomenon that the division of the world into identity-based in-groups and out-groups instinctively results in the triggering of both positive feelings for members of one's own group and highly negative feelings for members of opposing groups.

Parties at these times are defined by purity tests and moral condemnation of political rivals.

At these time, everything becomes politicized—weather, science, which countries are enemies and which are allies—and votes and support of issues will be almost entirely along partisan lines.

These developments are what we see in American politics in recent years.

Americans not only disagree with people in the other party (this would be issue-based polarization), but increasingly dislike and distrust them.

In fact, hostility to the opposite party—**what political scientists call negative polarization**—is the most important determinant of the fracturing of US politics today.

Increased attachment to one's party in recent years has not increased primarily because people like their party more, but because they are more opposed to the other party.

This negative polarization is happening among both Democrats and Republicans.

- A 2018 poll, for example, found that 61 percent of Democrats thought Republicans racist, sexist, or bigoted. And about half of Republicans thought Democrats ignorant or spiteful.
- Members of both parties dehumanize the other. In a 2019 survey, twenty percent Republicans and Democrats agreed with the statement that their political adversaries “lack the traits to be considered fully human — they behave like animals.”

- 20 percent of Democrats and 16 percent of Republicans have thought or think on that the country would be better off if large numbers of the opposition died.
- Perhaps most alarming, another 2019 survey found that just over 42 percent of the people in both parties view the opposition as “downright evil.”

The stakes created by the effects of negative polarization are extremely high.

In order for constitutional democracy to survive, members of each party have to respect the legitimacy or the other’s right to rule.

This condition is necessary for political compromise, for the peaceful transition of power from one party to another, and the preservation of the rules that allow for free and fair elections.

I am less and less confident that this condition of viewing the other party as legitimate either is or will be met.

- Many leaders and members of both parties view the other in the lead up to this election as fundamentally illegitimate that can only win by fraud or dirty tricks.
- Both sides view the election in apocalyptic terms that will define the success or failure of the United States. A good number of partisans believe the election will either result in the rise of fascism on the one hand or the rise of leftist radicalism and anarchy on the other.
- Both sides believe that if the other comes to power, the winning party will change the rules of politics that will prevent in future elections the expression of the true will of the American people.
- Both sides view the other as hostile to bedrock American principles, making the other un-American.

When the hostility between contending parties is so wide and the stakes involved with winning or losing so high, key preconditions for constitutional democracy no longer exist and violence becomes easy to justify.

As Lincoln, quoting scripture, famously put it in 1858, “a House divided against itself cannot stand.”

What can be done about the situation?

I believe our faith can provide a powerful antidote to the perils of political polarization.

Specifically, I believe that focusing on the **transcendent nature of God** can help foster reconciliation among contending groups.

Transcendence is one of the most important concepts in the Bible.

It refers to the idea that God and His law are forever and always above the capacity of humans to perfectly understand and to fully realize.

Indeed, original sin was based on the idea that God's knowledge is beyond humans and we delude ourselves into thinking we can possess it. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD" in Isaiah.

If we take transcendence seriously, it means that all of our goals, values, beliefs, and institutions fall short of the glory of God.

All we do and achieve is corrupted to some degree by self interest and biases of time and place.

The very best we can say about our political positions is that they are partial approximations of the truth.

To deny the partiality and contingency of our thought is the very definition of sin.

Focusing on the transcendence of God and His law has profound implications.

Most importantly from my perspective, transcendence shatters self delusion and pride at both the individual and group levels.

Here's how the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr explained things: "A religion of revelation [meaning a transcendent religion] is grounded in the faith that God speaks to man from beyond the highest pinnacle of the human spirit; and that this voice of God will discover man's highest not only to be short of the highest but involved in the dishonesty of claiming that it is the highest."

Niebuhr is saying that whenever we think we have the answers, look up at the skies and stars and contemplate the vastness of creation that is beyond our ability to know, and then repent for being convinced of the surety of our wisdom.

Jesus frequently pointed to the transcendence of God's law as a means of shattering self delusion and pretension.

When the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman whom they intended to stone, Jesus rebuked them by saying: "Let he that is without sin cast the first stone."

Jesus did not try to convince the men not to stone the woman out of love for neighbor.

Jesus instead forced the men to confront their relationship with a transcendent God. Only those who have perfectly fulfilled God's law were in a position to judge.

When viewed in the context of transcendence, perceived superiority is not as clear or as important as we may want to believe.

I chose to focus on the parable of the wheat and the weeds because to my mind it has particularly important political implications.

Jesus in the parable is not saying that good and evil, which are symbolized by the wheat and the weeds, do not exist or that the differences between them are unimportant.

But he says we should let both grow into the harvest together.

This is a very strange command. No self-respecting farmer or gardener would willingly allow weeds to crowd out crops or flowers. Why should we in our political affairs allow people we believe are evil threaten the good that we aim to achieve?

I believe that Jesus is pointing to the harm done by self righteousness and being so sure that our side is right and the other side is wrong.

When we are too confident in the correctness, virtue, and purity of our side—and by implication convinced in the errors if not evil in the other side—is precisely when we are prone to destructive political crusades.

As Niebuhr put it: "A too confident sense of justice always leads to injustice."

This destruction and self defeat caused by self-righteousness is what Jesus is warning about in the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

In pulling out the weeds, we run the risk of killing the wheat.

In our zeal to destroy our enemies, in other words, we may do more harm than good and damage the very things we are trying to protect.

Expound on Niebuhr's point.

People who are so sure of what is right and what is wrong forget that there is a judgment beyond our judgment, wisdom beyond our wisdom, purity beyond our purity.

Focusing on God's transcendent nature shatters our pretensions and pushes for humility, and humility is a key to political compromise and reconciliation.

If my side can at best possess only part of the truth, maybe my opponents have a different dimension of truth from which I can learn. **Let both grow into the harvest together.**

Lincoln possessed the wisdom of Jesus' parable.

Lincoln's overriding political objectives were not only to preserve the union from the rebellion and end slavery, but to reconcile the North and South so that a new, more perfect union could be created.

It would have been understandable for Lincoln to have called for a punitive peace against a defeated foe that had defended the evil of slavery.

Many in the North were advocating such an approach. But not Lincoln. He wanted to rebuild the nation not based on the victory of one party or one section of the nation over another, but on reconciliation.

Lincoln's constant awareness of God's transcendent nature pushed him to take the magnanimous position that he did.

The fact that slavery was evil and one side more responsible for war than the other were not the key points to Lincoln.

Because God's purposes were unknowable, as Lincoln asserted in his Second Inaugural, and because both North and South, even if in different degrees, were implicated in the guilt of slavery, the only appropriate responses to victory were

humility, repentance, and tangible acts of compassion to all (“with malice toward none and charity for all,” as Lincoln put it).

Lincoln, unlike many others, refused to treat Southerners as evil men or the civil war as a holy war designed to cleanse the body politic.

If Lincoln could express such humility and empathy in the context of the civil war when the issue of the day was slavery versus freedom, surely we can do so today.

Just as in Lincoln's day, there are some people in our country who possess evil ideas. There are racists and anarchists, and authoritarians on both left and right.

But the lessons from Lincoln are:

- that we should not be quick to paint people with those labels,
- should not judge people by their worst moments,
- and should not assume the worst about people's motives based on for whom they vote.

I don't know who will be our next president. But I do know two things.

First, we will have a president. It might take longer than usual but a victor will emerge.

Second, roughly half the country will be bitterly disappointed by the outcome.

- No matter who wins, will we as a country recognize the contingency and incompleteness of our party's positions?
- Are we willing to say that the other party possesses some important collective wisdom?
- Will we work to find areas of agreement despite our differences as opposed to working primarily for the other side's defeat and vanquishing?

It is of course easy for us to say to ourselves that the **other party** should recognize the legitimacy and wisdom of our party.

The hard part is saying and believing that the other party potentially expresses a truth and possesses a wisdom that our side doesn't possess.

After his electoral victory in 1860, Lincoln implored that the winners of the election and their supporters quote “neither express, nor cherish any harsh feelings toward any citizen who, by his vote, has differed with us. Let us at all times remember that

all Americans are brothers of a common country, and should dwell together in the bonds of fraternal feeling.”

Lincoln held this view until his death in 1865.

My prayer is that we adopt a similar attitude both before and after November 3rd and the wheat and the weeds that are in all of us be allowed to grow into the harvest together.