

May 6, 2020
By Bishop Steve Breedlove

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercession, and thanksgivings be made for all people . . . that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 1 Tim 2:1-2.

In the past two weeks, the COVID-19 conversation has turned to “reopening for business.” We are lurching and stuttering toward a return to normal. State governments are processing out loud, reading daily status reports, and unveiling a broad range of shifting possibilities for reopening. Reflective of the current state of our union, strategies for returning to normal are stirring up passionate public opinions and debates. Sadly, the political recrimination, accusation, and labelling that we have gotten used to have shaped this conversation as well. Several of our clergy have lamented recently, “The communities we serve are severely divided just when we should be making every effort to come together and do the right thing for the good of all.”

As fully human people living in this particularly conflictive world, Christians also have strong opinions on these matters. Camps emerge within local churches. We can judge, accuse, label, and even demonize those we think wrong. Brothers and sisters look askance at one another. If the Zoom screen allows us to hide scowls of criticism and judgment, it also allows us to nurture them without the balancing check of actual interactions with flesh and blood people.

Back to several clergies’ recent lament: “Bishop, the cultural division is showing up in our church. Pray for us.”

When Jesus came to ancient Israel, society was more fiercely divided into political camps than we are. Four (not just two) parties advocated radically different strategies for solving national crises. All of them claimed to reflect God’s will. Politics and religion were rolled into unified platforms even more self-confidently than our current political camps. Jesus’ answer? He was radically apolitical. He refused to advocate political change but instead called for personal spiritual transformation. He spoke and lived prophetically. Every party’s idiosyncratic errors were exposed by his life and words. He called his followers to live in this world as citizens of another kingdom – a kingdom that infiltrates society and culture like yeast with godliness, spiritual fervor, humility, generosity, compassion, truth, and love.

As we wrestle through the thorny details of reopening for business, it’s time to be the Church. The pandemic has been painful for all of us, devastating for some. People are hurting, afraid, stirred up. If we have ever needed the Church to be a prophetic voice that is sympathetic and compassionate to our neighbors, that seeks peace, that speaks grace and truth, and that reaches toward broader unity, it is now.

How can we possibly do this? St Paul says in 1 Timothy 2, the first step is prayer. Most of our regular offices of prayer and worship prompt us to pray for society, government, and

political leaders. Don't leave those prompts at the virtual door of your livestream service: take them into your prayer closet. Spend time listening to the Lord's guidance as you pray for our country. Don't presume to know how to pray for leaders: we can far too easily reflect our own politics in our prayers and miss the prophetic mark of true Kingdom citizenship. Pray with sympathy and compassion, understanding that we share much in common with neighbors. Pray and act toward blessing. (1 Peter 3:8-17)

Second, listen sympathetically to anyone you engage about political strategies for reopening. Ask many questions, make few statements. Listen, and then listen more. What are you afraid of? What worries you? What is the most important thing you think we can do to recover hope? Don't answer politics with politics. Listen, and be ready if God gives you opportunity to speak about the hope we have in Christ.

Third, face your own fears, and admit your own desires. Complain directly to the Lord about the losses and hurts you're experiencing during the pandemic. Let God begin to dislodge your idols. As you pursue honesty with God, adopt a posture of humility, knowing that we often lose sight of our primary calling – infiltrating the world with the pervasive leaven of the Gospel of Jesus.

Finally, guard the unity of the body in the bond of peace. Stop reading and commenting on social media. Work earnestly to build unity and peace in your local church through actual relationships with people. *“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, not frightened in anything . . .”* Philippians 1:27-28a.

Jesus' radical apolitical stance is a profoundly good gift to his Church. Why? Christians have had to learn to live as citizens of the true Kingdom within every political system and condition devised by the heart of mankind. God's people have always found a way to receive and offer blessing. In this moment, the Church can offer sympathy and understanding for the core human fears and desires of our neighbors. We can direct people to a more sure hope. Most of all, we can pray faithfully and humbly for that which makes for true peace, quiet lives, and the basic common good of humanity created in the image of God, 1 Timothy 2:5-6.

Grace and peace in Jesus,

Bishop Steve