

**Faith and Politics**  
**Matthew 5: 1-12**  
**Dr. Eugene Cho**

Today we have a guest on the screen, Dr. Eugene Cho, who preached at our Presbytery meeting in September, and all four pastors and all six commissioners from Westminster agreed if we could take some excerpts from his 37-minute sermon and boil it down a bit, it would be well worth your hearing. His recent book entitled **Thou Shalt Not be a Jerk: A Christian's Guide to Engaging in Politics** will give you a sense of what he is trying to explore and help Christians to realize we need to engage because politics affect policies, and policies impact people. We believe his focus on scripture and his desire for us to be faithful will be a blessing to us all.

Let us listen to our brother in Christ:

What I would share with you is first to convey that politics matter. We'll get into more of the nitty-gritty stuff but I want to share with you that politics matter. The reason why it matters, friends, is because politics informs our policies that influences people. And the last time I read the word of God, the last time I opened the scriptures, God cares about people. And more specifically, He cares, yes about everyone, but He cares about those who are oppressed or marginalized – the hungry and the poor. He cares about the vulnerable; and as the people of God, we are called to care for the things that God cares for.

This is the reason why I think the Beatitudes is so important. The Beatitudes gives us a glimpse of a framework for the Kingdom of God. It gives us an imagination about the Kingdom, about the ethics of Christ. For example, theologians believe that in the scripture verses that we just read today, that you could separate verses 3-6 and verses 7-10. Verses 3-6 speak about those who are marginalized or vulnerable and verses 7-10 speak to those who choose to come alongside, who choose to dignify, who choose to stand in solidarity with those who might be forgotten or oppressed.

This is the reason why as we are thinking about the Kingdom of God; we have to remind ourselves that our theology should never be hijacked by politics but rather our theology should be that which informs our politics and not the other way around.

Let's dig into a handful of these things.

I want to share five things if I may. The first one if you are taking notes, I want to encourage you to write down the words "cultural Christianity." Cultural Christianity. In the church when we're speaking about things that serve as threats to the church, our tendency is to always look outward; to look at the dangerous things over there – maybe

secularism. Whatever it might be, we tend to look outward as things that pose as threats to the church. As a result, our inclination then is to form our holy huddles, build a moat around the church, and then try to protect ourselves.

Now I would submit to you respectfully, that in my opinion the greatest challenge is not out there, the greatest challenge in my opinion is actually within Christianity. It's the temptation to build the structures and institutionalism of Christianity but without a parallel commitment to Jesus Christ. It's politicians and even Christian pastors and leaders who sprinkle on a pinch of Jesus into our thinking, speeches, or sermons, but often in a way that fulfills our agendas or goals. In other words, using Jesus to promote our branding or platform or worse our nationalism. This is the danger of cultural Christianity that eventually and predictably produces cultural Christians rather than disciples of Christ. From a political perspective cultural Christianity is when our theology is held captive by our politics rather than our politics being informed and even transformed by our theology. The danger of this predicament takes us back all the way to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were tempted to be like – or even to be – God. In other words, the oldest sin in humanity has been to conform God into our image. So, as we read the scriptures, if we're never offended, convicted, disrupted, or stirred by the Holy Spirit, it's quite possible that we've conformed Jesus into our own thinking, liking, and image.

So, what are the dangers and implications of cultural Christianity? Imagine a Christianity that conforms to a culture and all of its shifts and changes and no longer adheres to the scandalous radical love-grace teachings and life of Jesus Christ. Imagine an institutional Christianity that's obsessed with power, influence, and platform again without a commitment to the counter-cultural commitment of Jesus Christ. A commitment to empire rather than the Kingdom of God.

How else, friends, could we explain what transpired in Germany with the rise of Hitler and Nazism. In Germany at the start of World War II, some historians report that up to 94% of the nation were professing Christians. How could there be such dissidence except to acknowledge the ills and poison of cultural Christianity? How else could we explain why so many were professed to be Christians and yet choose to become seduced by the evil propaganda of Hitler.

But it wasn't just merely in Nazi Germany. We witnessed this actually throughout history when Christian institutions go to be with power and then embody practices that are antithetical to the gospel. This was evident, for example, when religious leaders used erroneous theology to dismiss and judge the poor in the book of Amos. This was evident when missionaries engaged in horrific practices of colonization and abuse of power with native American boarding schools in my home state of Washington. During the summer of 2019, I was invited by a Christian organization to lead a small group of American pastors to travel to Rwanda for the purpose of listening and learning about truth telling and confession and forgiveness and justice and reconciliation from Rwandan citizens, activists and pastors.

Now you might be asking why Rwanda? Tragically, the people and nation of Rwanda experience what has often been referred to as the Rwandan genocide. An unfathomable genocide in 1994 where for about 100 days approximately 1 million total Rwandans were killed including more than 800,000 minority Tutsis at the hands of extremist Hutus. Now the reasons are extremely complex but what's not complex is that Rwandans killed Rwandans, family killed family, neighbors killed neighbors. Even some husbands killed their Tutsi wives. Christians killed fellow Christians. What makes this tragedy even more incredulous is that during this time of the genocide both ethnic groups were predominantly Christian as over 90% of the Rwandan population claimed and still claims adherence to the Christian faith.

During this time last year, I'll never forget the conversations that we had with Rwandan activists and pastors. They gave me and the other pastors a stern warning about the dangers of placing any allegiance above our obedience to Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. In essence, the dangers of cultural Christianity.

Here's number two: Don't go to bed with political parties or powerful politicians. Friends, I'm not suggesting that you can't affiliate with a particular party; I'm not suggesting that you can't donate to someone's campaign; I'm not suggesting that you can't join and volunteer. I'm simply saying ultimately, we should never be seduced so that we stop thinking and engaging in critical thought, discourse, and prayer about why we believe in what we believe.

Now, as someone who has written a book about faith and politics, the most pervasive question that I get is, "Pastor Eugene, are you a Republican or a Democrat? Are you a conservative or liberal?" And my honest answer is not that I'm trying to be circuitous in my answer, my honest answer is, "On what issue?" Meaning, I truly believe that there is not a single party or politician that can encapsulate what I believe to be the Kingdom of God as embodied in the person of Jesus and as attested in scripture.

As a result, when I first became a Christian at the age of 18, I was told very clearly, if you're a good Christian, you must vote Republican. Don't ask questions. And interestingly now in our current year, especially living in the great Northwest – I live in Seattle – I hear the absolute opposite with the same kind of vitriol, if you're a true Christian who believes in justice, you must vote Democrat. So as a result, what ends up happening, is that to some you're just too conservative; to others, you're too liberal or progressive. And I firmly believe, as challenging as it may be in our world today, to be a Christ follower is to be faithful amid tension, to stay engaged, to remain hopeful, to love anyway, to walk with integrity, and to bear witness to the love, mercy, and grace of Jesus Christ.

Now friends, please don't misconstrue what I am saying. I'm not suggesting that we apply to have no convictions, to be soft; I think we should be bold and courageous but even in the midst of all of these things we'll find ourselves in tension. Stay engaged, remain hopeful, love anyway, walk with integrity, and bear witness to Jesus Christ.

Here's number three: Don't just vote. Now, friends, I truly believe voting is a privilege. And I do believe that Christians should vote and while I do know that there are non-Christians and Christians who for a variety of reasons may choose not to vote, I think it is an important duty as followers of Jesus to seek to be good citizens here on this earth. So, as we vote, my encouragement is don't just vote. In other words, if we reduce our citizenship here on this earth to one vote every four years and then you get a sticker and you apply it to your jacket and then take a selfie to tell people that you are a good person, I would suggest to you that we're actually part of the problem.

It's the same thing about our faith. If we reduce our walk with Jesus to a 60-minute worship service, and that's the totality of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, there's a dissidence in the same way that church isn't an hour service. In the same way that church isn't a building. Being a good neighbor is not just one vote every four years; being a good neighbor is not just putting on an "I voted" sticker. To be a good neighbor is at the core of what it means for us to be followers of Jesus and is something that we do every single day. Beyond national elections or state elections, how we choose to befriend and engage literally our neighbors in the same way that we care about global missions, we've got to cross the street. You cannot love your neighbors if you don't know your neighbors. We need to care about our local schools, our local issues. We need to care about issues of hunger and homelessness. We need to care about flourishing in our respective neighborhoods and cities.

Friends, here's number four: Keep fellowship and unity in the church. I wish I had more time to go into this. But it's a very challenging time in our nation and frankly all around the world. And I know that many of us are wrestling with how do we maintain a level of relationship and friendship? I think this is where the church has something to offer to our larger society and the world. The church has the capacity to bring people to the Table of God. One of my most favorite elements and maybe the most important aspect I think of church is when churches welcome people and we celebrate the Lord's Table together.

I love the Lord's Table because it's a reminder to us that no matter what happens at a church – even if the announcements aren't all that great, even if the worship set is a little bit off, even if this sermon might not be quite to your liking, the reality is we will always end on good news when we remind people of the Lord's Table that Jesus Christ went to the cross, died for our sins, invites us into a relationship with Him to be a part of the Kingdom of God. This crucified Jesus is risen and Christ is not yet done. He is coming back one day to restore all things.

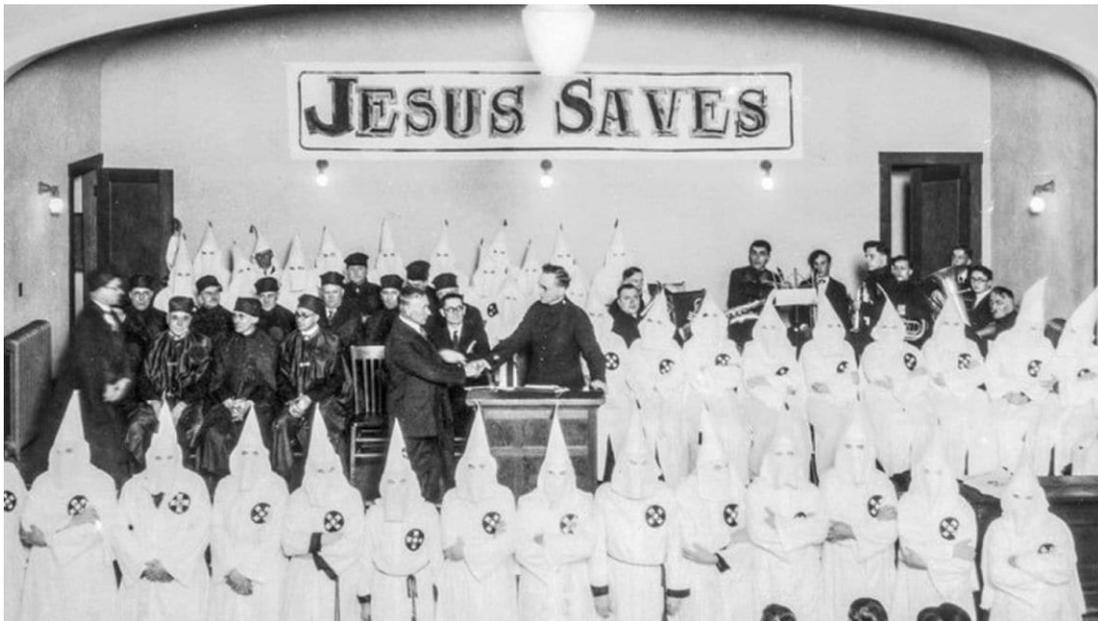
And this is the reason why when we serve Communion, we have to remind people we don't have a line on your left that serves juice for those lefties and progressives. We don't have a line on the right that serves grape juice for our conservative Christians. And we don't have a line in the center – the gluten free option – for the soft independents.

The Lord's Table is able to welcome all. The Lord's Table is such that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is such that Christ loves us where we are but also loves us in such a way that the Holy Spirit is informing and transforming each of us.

Friends, be careful not to dehumanize those who disagree with you. In our self-righteousness, we can become the very things we criticize in others. In other words, I'm all for contending for convictions but let's not be jerks in the process. Be respectful, be mature, be wise. Hear this well, the world doesn't need more jerks for Jesus.

The last thing that I'll share is that we need both personal change and structural change. Now, as a pastor, the most pervasive thing that I often hear from people is this: "Pastor Eugene, I disagree with you, it's a sin issue. It's a heart issue. If hearts change, then everything changes in the world." Obviously, I believe it's a sin issue. But in addition to sin, I sometimes wonder if we're diminishing the power of systemic and institutional evil in our larger world.

I want to introduce a photo here in this sermon. It's a very graphic photo and I want to give you a warning, especially for those who are black and brown in your respective congregation. It's a photo from the 1960s or 50s from the Jim Crow era and it's a photo again that I sometimes don't share but I want to show this to explain the difference and the importance of both heart and structural change. Here's the photo.



This photo is jarring. Absolutely jarring. Because you see all of these individuals hooded and non-hooded standing in front of a church altar with those words we would construe as true and good news that Jesus saves. You might think if only these hearts, if only these individual hearts would change. While that is a good thing to pursue, just because we remove someone doesn't diminish that there is a culture, a system that's evil or demonic that we need to not only confront but also change.

Did you realize, for example, in the United States, between 1882-1968, 4,742 people were reported lynched in this country. In 99% of cases the perpetrators escaped punishment. Some of you might be wondering, well, that was a long, long time ago. But if you were to just examine our respective world today, whether it's the story of George Floyd, whether it's the story of Ahmaud Arbery, whether it's the story of Breonna Taylor, whether it's the story of housing covenants in our respective cities and the list goes on and on. I live in a town called Ballard in Seattle and in my town between the 1910s and 1960s we had many Seattle neighborhoods that practiced overt, racist exclusions. For example, in my neighborhood, it had these instructions in housing covenants:

"No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any Hebrew or by any person of the Ethiopian, Malay, or any Asiatic race." You see hearts do need to change but this is the reason why we need both the importance of the church and the importance of healthy, compassionate, just politics to be able to work together so that there is flourishing in our larger society and beyond.

The last thing that I'll share is to simply say that this work is not possible alone. So it is a reminder for us that we must always be the people of God, seeking God's presence, God's guidance, and the move of the Holy Spirit. And so it's my prayer for each and every single one of you that even though it's incredibly messy and it will always be messy until that day when Jesus comes back; don't shy away, don't look away, let's stay engaged, let's be faithful, let's have integrity, and let's engage politics not because it's the answer or the only answer, but it is one way for us as followers of Jesus in a fallen world to try to love our neighbors and to love God.

God bless you.