

“Paul’s Stump Speech”

OT 4A-20

1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31

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Rev. Rob Carter

“Paul’s Stump Speech”

You should be forewarned. I’m talking about politics today. Or, perhaps better said, I’m talking about stump speeches. You know them. You’ve heard them. They’re the speeches politicians give on their campaign trails and at townhall meetings. They’re the speeches they draw on in interviews and debates. They’re the speeches that seek to outline a candidate’s ideas, their plans, how they’ll vote, what they’ll do if you elect or re-elect them to office. That’s what a stump speech is supposed to be, at least. “Why you should vote for me.”

Unfortunately, at least in my opinion it’s unfortunate, stump speeches don’t really do that. Instead, stump speeches largely follow the two biggest political rules of the day.

First, they often say a heckuva lot without saying anything particularly distinct at all. They often lift up vague ideas that are largely void of details or strategy, and therefore void of anything that could really offend folks.

Second, stump speeches often have much more to do with a candidate’s opponent than the candidate’s own self. They’re not just “why you should vote for me,” but “why you sure as heck shouldn’t vote for the other candidate.”

This is the part that makes politics so divisive. As politics two primary rules tend to be: don’t offend the masses, and get the masses to hate your opponent.

It’s why politics is not actually designed to lift up competing ideas and ideals, and then strive to implement them with integrity and honor if elected. Our political system is also about causing damage to the other side... whoever the other may be... in order to gain more power, more leverage for yourself.

It’s why good politicians—or, I should say, politicians who get elected—tend to not only be skilled at talking about themselves in vague and flattering terms. They’re also skilled at tearing the other side down. They present their side as right and good and righteous, and the other side as greedy or wrong or flat-out treacherous.

And society, by and large, falls right into line. We assume that because they say so, we really must choose between this and that. That no other solutions actually exist. That there’s no need to explore still alternative possibilities than either side posits.

Of course, we all know this. I’m not saying anything radical when I point out that America is as divided today along party lines as it ever has been. That each side thinks the other is rotten.

Which all goes to show the power system of our society’s political structure is fundamentally us vs. them. The system is rigged to get us pitting ourselves against the other—

whoever the other may be. Choose the good side; the light side; the right side. Or choose the bad side; the dark side; the wrong side.

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And, while I wish it wasn't, the truth is that the Church can be guilty of this, too. Playing politics. Of taking political calculations. Acting as if there aren't multiple, faithful perspectives to the same exact issue. Pretending like we all have to agree on every last thing in order to be agreeable with each other.

It's why I've heard more than a few times that a good pastor *could* make a good politician. Have you ever heard that? A good pastor could make a good politician? The first time I heard that I thought it was crazy, and frankly, a bit insulting. But the more I've thought about it, the more I get it.

Pastors are regularly put in the position of making a choice they know will please some but upset others... of being asked to pick a side.

Sometimes, Stephen and I talk about picking a hymn we know some folks will love, but other folks will probably loathe. Should we still pick it?

Sometimes, Joel and I explore a new direction for adult spiritual formation or youth ministry or mission and outreach that we know some folks will resonate with, but others could be put off by it and wonder why we're trying to change something that's working. Should we still try it?

Other times, the Session—the governing board—discusses a sense of what they believe God is calling them to endeavor, but it might require a significant change some may not be ready for... or it might entail risking something valuable to pursue it. Should we risk it?

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It all reminds me of a story by one of my favorite storytellers, Fred Craddock. He shared about a minister who was so excited to have been called to a church.

The chair of the Pastor Nominating Committee had the pastor and his family over for a backyard barbecue. And the pastor said, "You can't imagine what a delight it is to come to a church and know you've been elected to come by unanimous vote."

While he flipped some burgers, the chair said, "Well, it was practically unanimous."

"Well, what do you mean, 'practically unanimous'?"

"Well, let's just say that it was unanimous."

"Well, what... what was the vote really?"

"The vote was 234 to 2"

"To two," the pastor gasped?

For the next six months the pastor worked and worked to figure out who those two "no" votes were. Once he figured it out, he spent the next six months trying to please those two who'd voted no. But sadly, by the end of year, the church decided to move on from that pastor, with a vote—2 in favor of him, 234 against.¹

¹ Fred B. Craddock, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 43.

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Now, two things. First, I jokingly ask you not to get any bright ideas from that story.

But secondly, and much more seriously, I get that story in a way I wish didn't. I do. Like politicians, pastors tend to be people pleasers. Pastors like to be liked. And like politicians, we're in a similar sort of people-pleasing business.

What's more, no one actually enjoys making a decision they know will displease others.

Which is why so many pastors... and so many churches... play politics. They struggle with doing the faithful thing in order to pursue the most popular thing. Let me repeat that. They struggle with the call to do the faithful thing to pursue the most popular thing. And if that's not political, I don't what is.

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Thankfully, in our lessons from 1 Corinthians today we get a firsthand lesson in how to avoid politics in the church. Frankly, it's the same lesson we can glean from Paul's letters to the Galatians and Philippians as well. But for purposes of this sermon, we'll stick with the church in Corinth.

As scholars note, the "Corinthian church (was) a diverse, lively community"² and, like every diverse, lively community there ever was, they didn't agree on everything. Evidently, of particular concern to the Corinthians was how to deal with tensions around wealth and need, and possibly education, too. As these concerns and tensions grew, so, too, did folks' insistence on adhering to their own perspective, until it seems that the entire community began to tear into competing groups, each taking a competing side of the issues.³

Quite simply, the church was in schism. So the Corinthian leaders wrote to Paul, asking him to settle things once and for all. In their letter, they asked him a simple question. "Who's right?" And "Who's wrong?" Please, Paul, pick a side so we can move on.

But how's this for a political response?

"You're ALL wrong!" Paul wrote back. "Every last one if you is wrong, because you're trying to win a competition... and faith has nothing, absolutely to do with competition.

"You're wrong for thinking faith has anything to do with winning an argument.

"You're wrong for assuming faith has anything to do with painting the other side as treacherous.

"You're wrong for thinking faith has anything to do with building dividing walls, or picking sides, or insisting on *your* way, or *your* perspective.

"Because faith in Jesus Christ calls us to unity," Paul said. "Not the kind of unity in which everyone has to agree on everything. But the kind of unity in which everyone seeks what's best for the other. The kind of unity in which there is no one-upmanship. The kind of unity that sees the image of God even in the one with whom you disagree."

Quite frankly, if Paul had a stump speech, I think that may be it. Whether it was the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Philippians, or others, he was constantly having to confront the political realities of his day. And as he confronted them, let's be clear. Paul didn't care about

² Alan Gregory, "Pastoral Perspective" on 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18 in *Feasting on the Word: Year A Volume 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 282.

³ Ibid.

being liked. He didn't care about whatever was most politically expedient. He cared, quite simply, about pursuing whatever was most faithful, regardless of what was most popular.

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It means, friends, that you and I are still called to talk about the tough issues... we're still called to take stands... we're still called to follow Jesus' model of speaking out for the silenced and standing up for the oppressed. But even as we do... even when we disagree on the exact ways of doing so... we're to speak and act in such a way that we show the world what it means to love the one we disagree with.

Imagine that if you can. A body, a community, a movement in the world today that shows others what it means to love the one you disagree with. We need that. Our nation needs that. Our world needs that.

So let's keep practicing it, Towson Presbyterian. With love as our guide, let's keep digging into tough issues. Let's keep talking about systemic racism and our role in it. Let's keep talking about the epidemic of gun violence and what we can do to combat it. Let's keep investing in Creation Care and Disaster Relief and Food Insecurity and whatever else the Spirits puts before us. Let's keep pursuing the kingdom of God we see modeled here at this very table where all are welcome and all are fed, until the systems of this world are no longer rigged to harm some in order to bless others.

Quite simply, Towson Presbyterian Church, let's be the Church that doesn't care what's popular because we're determined to pursue what's faithful, that the world might see the kingdom of God is never us vs. them; it's us *for* them. Amen.