

“The Christian Case for Pluralist Democracy”

Matthew 15:21-28; Matthew 26:47-56 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – September 18, 2022
Christianity & Democracy Series, Part I

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might remember and honor the
light of love that draws us in. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

I am glad that you are here today, as we begin this three-part series on Christianity & Democracy. Let me begin by saying a word about why it seemed important to embark on such an endeavor. As you may have heard in the news, there is a phenomenon called Christian Nationalism that, though it's been part of American culture for decades, has been moving out of the shadows and much more into the mainstream in recent months. Christian Nationalism is a distortion of Christianity used to disguise an extremist political ideology that seeks to exercise power over others by means both coercive and violent, as deemed necessary. We will get more into that in the last part of this series, on World Communion Sunday, when preachers across the country are being encouraged to speak out against the heresies of Christian Nationalism. I realized as I was contemplating how to do that, that there are a few things I need to say before we get to that part, and thus this three-part series was born. I am grateful for your patience and fortitude, as we explore these difficult issues together and discern how to respond as faithful followers of Jesus.

What I have realized, as I've read about the zealots who are pushing these extreme stances, is that we can no longer take for granted that faithful Christians are also stalwart believers in democracy. And so, surprising as it may be – and it definitely is to me – what I want to share today is my understanding of the Christian case for pluralist democracy. I'm guessing that you, like me, haven't spent a lot of time articulating for yourself why your faith supports a democratic political system, because it's just been a background assumption we've lived with our whole lives. But the times we live in are demanding that we get clearer and louder about the specifics of our convictions, so that there is no confusion about where the way of Jesus points.

To be clear, the reason we need to do this is that there are people claiming the label Christian who are suggesting that democracy's day is past, that it's now time for Christians (their definition of Christians, that is) to take over and run things, suppressing diversity of thought, belief, faith, and practice. This approach is often known as Dominionism, as in, these folks are going to have dominion – or authority – over all the rest of us. Now, before we simply dismiss this as obviously not congruent with the way of Jesus, we need to confess that there are strong strains of this approach to the world throughout Christian history. Indeed, most of the history of Western Europe and the Crusades in particular, prove that people interpreted Christianity as divine permission to conquer and rule for centuries. So it's not like this came out of nowhere. But here is where our Disciples heritage offers us the theological support we need for our better instincts.

Our tradition, as you likely know, was born on the American frontier, in a period when the fullness of religious liberty was coming to fruition. The simplicity of “no creed but Christ” was, to some degree, a reaction to the division and violence caused by religious coercion all over Europe. But our forebears weren’t just making up their freedom-loving, “live and let live” approach out of whole cloth. They were finding its roots in the gospel. The early Disciples tradition leaned on a value called “restorationism,” which encouraged folks to model their life and their faith as closely as possible on the example of the early church. Our wing of this movement has since discerned that the New Testament isn’t as clear as early Disciples hoped and simply doesn’t speak to many modern issues the way we might wish. But our insistence on equality and rejection of hierarchy – which in the context of church, we call the “priesthood of all believers” – is part of what they saw in the scriptures. It is not a coincidence that the Disciples movement was finally born in a context where democracy was the rule of the land, but they saw whispers of it in the bubble the early church built for themselves despite living in the midst of Roman occupation.

At this point, it becomes important that I clarify why I am presenting the Christian case for pluralist democracy, rather than the biblical case. I could quote you a pile of verses from scripture to prove my point. But the Dominionists could do the same, and they do. The practice of proof-texting, or pulling verses out of the Bible regardless of their context to support an agenda, is a shaky foundation for a belief system. Disciples have long sought a more robust approach to scripture.

So as we make this Christian case, we will look at scripture, but also at the bigger picture the gospel presents, to see what we can discover about the nature of God revealed in Christ Jesus and how it might apply to the question of pluralist democracy. Before I proceed any further, let me clarify how I am using the word “pluralist.” In this context, I am referring to the fact that our democracy intentionally includes people of many different faiths and none. More broadly, the word speaks to the full diversity of humanity and implies that all people are equal within our democratic system, regardless of race, creed, or anything else that might invite hierarchical judgments.

Now, it would be anachronistic to imply that Jesus lived an interfaith society the way we do, but he clearly lived in a religiously pluralist context of his own. We don’t hear much about the various Roman religious practices in the gospels, though the epistles have quite a bit to say about them. What is more common in the stories of Jesus are his interactions with Samaritans and other cousins to the Jewish people, and the occasional Roman centurion. I pulled out this story of the Canaanite woman from Matthew 15 for us because I think it’s a pivotal “Aha!” moment for Jesus himself. Had he realized before this interaction that his ministry was bigger than his own religious community? It doesn’t seem so. And yet, he rises to the occasion and ushers in a whole new way of relating to people of other faiths. We see this openness again and again, as he interacts with Roman centurions, tells stories about virtuous Samaritans, and speaks of his “other flocks” in the gospel of John.

Jesus at his most bigoted, which is what we see laid bare in this story of his response to the desperate Canaanite woman, is still open to the power of God's love to transform hearts, including his own. It seems he learns the lesson much faster than most of us do. And he carries it to completion in ways most of us find even more challenging, as we see in our other scripture lesson.

We have lots of small examples of Jesus interacting with different people all throughout the gospels, but the greatest revelation in the story of Jesus is the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection. I pulled out this particular part of the story because it gets at our question directly. Are the methods of violence open to followers of Jesus? The answer is no. "Put your sword away." That is not how this works. Matthew, as you know, was writing to a predominantly Jewish audience and throughout his gospel has a strong concern for matching the stories of Jesus up with the Hebrew scriptures. Thus, the two references to the scriptures being fulfilled. For our purposes today, I believe we can read that phrase as telling us that "thus the nature of God is confirmed." Jesus' commitment to revealing God's nature and will is so strong that it leads him to give himself up for death. Not because he has no other options, but because to call upon legions of angels to rescue him would be to desecrate the image of God reflected within him.

The God of Jesus Christ is never a God of violence or coercion. Our God does not force anyone to believe or obey, but rather loves all of us and welcomes all of us home, regardless of the path we took to get there. Author Madeleine L'Engle

puts it this way: “We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.” That is how our Jesus works. In a death so full of grace that thieves and centurions praise and seek God at the sight of it. In healing so freely given that all people know themselves beloved, no matter their status or creed.

This is not a faith that seeks dominion over others. This is not a faith that desires to enforce its beliefs on others. The way of Jesus invites us to see what is precious about all our neighbors and value them as we value our own kin. Pluralist democracy may be messy and complicated and slow, but it’s rooted in an American value that the faith of Jesus upholds and indeed, insists upon: the basic equality of every child of God. To suggest that Christians should rule over our neighbors of other faiths or none is to fundamentally misunderstand the way of Jesus and the nature of God that Jesus revealed through his life, death, and resurrection.

I believe that you, like me, have long assumed these basic premises of our faith to be true, though we may not have had occasion to articulate them clearly before. The time for clarity is upon us. The time for us to share that the good news of Jesus includes all our neighbors in ways that fully respect their paths and practices. This is not a light that we can hide under a bushel any longer. Let us proclaim the gospel of peace and freedom and the preciousness of every person. Let us proclaim Christ, with humble joy and thanksgiving! Hallelujah and Amen!