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# Little Christian Lies: Polite Conversation

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Little Christian Lies develop from our desire for comfort.

Not intending malice, we begin to bend scripture, soften potent verbs, or neglect the tough texts because, well, life is hard enough. Relationships can hurt. Communities stifle us. Families fall apart. In tough times we turn to scripture's bucolic passages for comfort.

We imagine Jesus in the same manner. God incarnate arrives as an infant, meek and mild, whom we greet with hushed singing at Christmas. In the darkest season, we welcome this prince of peace.

As an adult, Jesus mesmerizes listeners with his preaching and with his grace-filled parables. Jesus tells of a shepherd getting in the muck to bring back the wayward sheep while he does the same for lost people. He offers cool water to the thirsty. Stands up to bullies. He befriends those who threaten his very life.

All of this healing is true. But if this is all we talk about in the church, we miss the depth and breadth and strength of his gospel.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus launches his ministry by proclaiming he will "restore sight to the blind." In other words, he will expose to our eyes what needs to change.

He promises to "set free those who are oppressed." Which also implies those who benefit from being in control will become angry when he breaks their systems of unjustly confining people.

In today's lectionary reading we join a crowd and the disciples while Jesus teaches.

In the midst of parables that warn them to make haste and do the good work...now, Jesus also comforts them with "do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." As he inches closer to Jerusalem, the urgency increases.

*Dear God, set us apart from the noise of the world around. Pull off the veils that shroud us from seeing and hearing clearly. May the words from your son startle us with the truth of our lives and your willingness to give us an abundant life. Amen.*

### **Luke 12:49-56**

"I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

*"From now on...five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;*

*they will be divided: father against son and son against father,  
mother against daughter and daughter against mother,  
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and  
daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain,' and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say,

'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

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Our image of the good shepherd Jesus tends to neglect these and similar teachings. For instance, when he preaches in his hometown synagogue, his neighbors fly into a rage and attempt to throw him off a cliff to a certain death. The people of Capernaum run him out of town. His reputation precedes him so that a Samaritan village prevents him from entering. Some say he is demon-possessed and "raving mad." The religious elite "oppose him fiercely." Many of his disciples quit following him.

Only a multifaceted and divine Jesus could link "do not be afraid little flock" with "I have come to cast fire...and bring division."

This savior into whose body we are baptized willingly breaks down social fabric and drives wedges in families. Our savior exposes the injustices that society politely sweeps under the rug. Our savior speaks up when others seek to silence the truth. Jesus wreaks havoc with the *go-along-to-get-along* culture that binds us to the expectation we are too polite.

No wonder Jesus repeats "do not be afraid" because the path to lasting peace comes with a price for those of us who follow him.

He will break the rigid social and economic pyramids that favor those in power at the expense of those considered

expendable. When Jesus speaks of *division* rather than *peace* in Luke's Gospel, he does not *prescribe* division as necessary, he merely *describes* what may occur.<sup>1</sup>

In his time, the family unit was the basis for society. The son joined his father in the family's trade – farming, fishing, or carpentry. He followed along or lost out. Mother and daughter maintained the family compound through a vital division of labor. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law became bound *by law* to one another as a proxy for family loyalty. During this era, no one could do it alone and everyone needed one another for day-to-day living.

In first century Palestine no one in a righteous home would welcome a tax collector or a sex worker to the dinner table. That's what Jesus does and his inclusion forces a decision: do you see another as an equal or cling to your ideas of who is worthy?

When Jesus releases someone confined to poverty or blamed for a physical difference, he forces a division among those who benefit from purity standards that protect their narrow preferences.

When the son of God heals someone who is outside of the religious customs, he demands we reconsider who is worthy of God's kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey West, Theological Perspective Luke 12:49-56," *Feasting on the Word Year C*, ed. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 358.

It's not Jesus's desire to set fathers against sons or mothers against daughters. He does not stir up conflict for conflict's sake. He is just warning us of the cost to be his follower.

To disagree within the household will open a crack that could potentially put asunder the tightly woven systems of commerce, cultural standing, faith practices, political allegiances, and any other ideologies and patronages that keep the family and community together.

Nothing is off-limits for him when it comes to restoring sight to those blind to how systems oppress. Nothing is too sacred. For Jesus to say, "I came to bring division rather than peace" means he will no longer tolerate the cultural norms, upheld by polite conversations, which lock people in their places.

His ministry encompasses the way we organize our common lives: the systems that *enable* or *deny* justice and *offer* or *withhold* mercy.

- This includes our treatment of single women, foster children, refugees.
- This includes access to affordable health care, housing, and food.
- This includes our willingness to share our abundance with those in need.
- This includes taking risks to protect the innocent – even those who are not in our family, tribe, or even nation.

Since these aspects of our common life are Jesus' and therefore God's concern, what we consider *politics* is also Jesus' concern.

*The Little Christian Lie exposed in Jesus' teaching today is  
"the church is no place for politics."*

The little lie that *the church is no place for politics* silences or intimidates us from the polarizing topics in the desire to go-along-to-get along.

This makes us squirm. Today's reading implies Jesus would not care. If anything, he'd likely incite more discomfort just to get us to admit why we refrain from talking about these vital aspects of human life.

At the beginning of human life, God shapes us to reflect God's will long before the word "politics" came into common vocabulary.

Before we became political beings, we were always and will always be beloved children of God. Therefore Jesus will not let the politics of the time keep him from the people...all the people...whom God sent him to love.

The aspects of modern life that are considered political remain a necessary part of our conversation and work as his church. There is a fundamental distinction, though: the church should not defend any contemporary *partisan* platform.

I'm not playing on words; I am emphasizing necessary differences.

I have my ideas and you have your ideas. I violate your sacred trust of standing in this pulpit if I seek to manipulate scripture to support my ideas.

The calling of the preacher is to proclaim the gospel, not a partisan platform.

As a member of the body of Christ, you shoulder a responsibility as well.

- Our Reformed faith upholds your direct access to discern the meaning of scripture and the call of the church.
- Our Reformed tradition relies upon our shared willingness to wrestle with how the church responds to social needs.
- And, our Reformed tradition reinforces everyone's privilege for faith to guide your personal decisions, particularly in civic affairs.

When the little Christian lie that *we don't want to talk about politics in church* softens our conviction to faith, we fall prey to the idolatry of greed and power. We slip into the hands of those who seek to put anything above God.

My thanks to the Rev. Tom Are, Jr for reminding me of an entirely relevant example from the not-too-distant past.

In December of 1861 a gathering of Presbyterians was held in the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, Georgia.

This was the first gathering of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America, later simply called the PCUS, or Southern Presbyterian

Church. It was hosted by The Reverend Joseph Wilson. Reverend Wilson's five-year-old son, Woodrow, would later become the twenty-eighth President of the United States.

During this Assembly, again in 1861, Reverend Wilson was joined by James Henley Thornwell, who was revered within our tradition for his critical theological knowledge. Wilson and Henley penned an open letter to the world offering theological justification for the enslavement of human beings.

They argued slavery was an institution of the state, and since the state exists as a political entity, it did, “transcend the sphere” of the faith. The concerns of the faith, they said, were spiritual, not civic. So, when it comes to the institution of slavery – what is often called America's original sin – when it comes to the institution of slavery, those Presbyterians argued, God had nothing to say.

It was idolatrous. Their partisan conviction had become their god, and their fear of loss of family and community caused them to deny the gospel.

We'd like to think our country has moved forward from such racist views. But we'd be foolish to not acknowledge the temptation to become silent in church when racism masquerades within contemporary practices. No one escapes that temptation. Not then nor now. Certainly not even in our denomination. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Are, Jr. “Are We Supposed to Be Talking About This in Church?” *Fourth Presbyterian Church*, September 15, 2024, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2024/091524TAJ.html>

One of the blessings of Westminster, among many, is the abiding desire you express for unity while you recognize differing partisan loyalties.

This is a blessing. Many times following a sermon, one of you cautions me – “you got a little political and might offend someone.” When I ask if I offended them, I usually hear, “oh no, but I just don’t want us to become disconnected from one another.”

We have become so afraid of offending another that a muzzle feels safer than the gospel. We’ve become so afraid of speaking out that we lose our ability to articulate what we believe and why.

Some have described us as a purple congregation -- meaning a collection of individuals with middle of the road partisan desires. I disagree, our congregation is not purple. What I discern among you, the gathered faithful, are loyal democrats and republicans and so many frustrated citizens.

If colors are helpful, we see bright stripes of red, blue, purple, and every other color imaginable when we look at this congregation. And, it must please God when this brightly colored and distinctive humanity gathers as one to serve Jesus.

In our worship, before we read scripture, we collectively confess the contents of our lives with the humility that we all fall short of what God desires. We fail in some ways to do what we should or do things that injure. We confess our sin. Immediately, we receive the assurance that we all receive

Jesus Christ's grace. Like his early followers, we too stand together on a level place.

We become more faithful to the gospel when, as a people who love Jesus and love our neighbors, we learn to listen to one another about the challenges of economics and housing, war, gun violence, trans rights, SNAP benefits, voting rights, legal residency, family planning – all influenced by our faith.

It's a lie that we cannot talk about politics in church. It is true that we become stronger, our church becomes more vital, and our community healthier when our faith informs our decision.

No party, no political leader, no one loves you as Jesus, who willingly gave his life to prove that the divine forces of love, and grace, and justice will always triumph.

It is a blessing for us to worship together, serve together, and grow in faith together. We become blessings for others when we model in this community what it means to honor the dignity of all people.





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