



First Principles Project

American Awakening | National Association of Evangelicals | Christianity Today

Full Sermon Text

PART 3. Citizens of Our Community

We have discussed the 2020 “Trifecta of Trauma” or “Great Disruption”. . . the greatest health crisis of the past century . . . economic dislocation for so many . . . And with the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arberry, and others, we are experiencing a great racial reckoning and social unrest.

And now — the political season is starting to feel like it may tear us apart altogether.

In this part, we will call 2020 the “Great Apocalypse”.

You didn’t expect to hear us use the big “A” word, Apocalypse, did you?

Because that is a word that for most of us conjures up fire, judgement, and the ‘end of the world.’

You may not have known this — I only came to this recently, but the word actually means ‘unveiling’ or ‘unfolding.’

In other words, a peek behind the curtain.

And in *that* definition, contrary to popular belief, according to the Christian tradition apocalypses are good news! You might even say they are *gospel*.

When you have society-wide trauma, when you have great disruption — you have a chance to get a peek behind the curtain of God’s perspective. His eyes. His vision — for our country, community, each other, and ourselves.

With this apocalypse, things are being revealed that had been there the whole time — hidden in plain sight — even for Christians.

- Deep wounds around the issues of racism, never fully addressed and certainly not resolved;
- Idolatries in the political world, where we attached ourselves to political answers as if they are the end of all things, and so they become god-like;
- With Covid, we found our attachment to a sort of ‘normalcy’ we thought would always be our foundation.

All these are so painful, aren’t they — you want to make them go away or ignore them — at least I do!



Embrace it. Lean into it. Let it be revealed. Let the band-aid come off to see the true wounds. Let what is hidden be seen.

Because one thing you'll notice with any apocalyptic moment of the scriptures — these moments always allow for a serious encounter with Jesus Himself.

There is an unveiling and a moment of *seeing Jesus with clear eyes and in a way we have never before*.

And that is the medicine for this moment. To be given a vision of the resurrected Jesus for who He truly is.

Not the American Jesus.

Not the social justice Jesus.

But the bodily resurrected Jesus who once walked the streets of Palestine as a Hebrew rabbinical teacher arriving as the long awaited King of Israel, who was to become King of the world.

And that has implications for, and should ripple out into, not only how we live as citizens of His Kingdom, but also citizens of our country.

And most immediately — who you are in your community.

How you act to the person next door. Your coffee barista, if you have one. Your boss. The dad who sits next to you at the little league games. The person who doesn't quite act, look, or talk like you.

And the litmus test for us is simple, yet crucial — are you a good neighbor?

Jesus told us we only had to fulfill one command here on earth, in what I like to call the “horizontal axis”— versus the vertical axis, which is loving God — to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In our great revealing of this year and this moment, do we care about the one thing Jesus asked us to do? And are we doing that?

There's a famous axiom attributed to 20th century government official Rufus Miles, *'where you stand depends on where you sit.'*

It is often described as “Miles Law”.

Most of our beliefs are informed by where we ‘sit’ or come from, meaning family of origin and first communities, where we hang out as adults, who we are constantly around, what we give most of our time



to, what websites we frequent, and what cable news we watch. We are to some extent formed into the image of the things and people and images we are around.

And that's not necessarily damning or wrong — it is just part of being a human being. We sit where we sit. It makes us unique, but it's also limiting.

We need to be aware of this limitation!

Social scientists, psychologists and neuroscientists call this our “cognitive biases” — our brains make subtle calculations and assumptions to fill in gaps.

Sometimes this is helpful, and sometimes this is really unhelpful!

Though scientists can explain this, they haven't been much help in helping us solve this.

So now we have a dilemma. On one hand, we have to realize we are all just people. Yes, where I stand on things generally has to do with where I sit (and that admission brings humility too by the way). But on the other hand, Jesus' radical upside world altering command of ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ demands we see beyond ourselves; that we see where our neighbor sits.

Jesus wants us to go farther, deeper. His way is more powerful and transformative.

The most mind blowing fact of the entire Christian tradition is if you sacrifice and give yourself up in love to another, you never lose — even though it might look or feel like it.

Just ask Jesus. In his moment on Calvary, the powers of the day were cheering his loss — yet now we look back and know that's the moment the world turned upside down forever.

Jesus didn't defend Himself or his position, and we don't need to either.

He told Peter to put away the sword and He is telling you to put away the metaphorical one too.

We're called to sacrifice and serve.

Whom, you might ask?

Your neighbors. Literally.

One thing so harmful about this moment is we are destroying the micro (our communities) in our polarized focus on the macro (the nation). We debate about the President, while most people don't even know their mayors' names.

But you know what? The people who will have as much or more impact as the president on your life and your kid's schooling — is the school principal. The city councilperson. And so on.



Your neighbors are your actual *neighbors*. The people you interact with in a real embodied way every day, week and year.

As a Christian it's your job to love them well. To be localized and embodied. Not rushing to close the front door so you don't have to talk over the fence. It means developing real relationships.

God has them in your life and next to you for a reason.

You think times are tough here in our country today — have you ever read Jeremiah?

Babylon was much worse than your neighborhood. Immorality, foreign gods, weird sacrificial rituals, and so on.

Yet Jeremiah speaks a word to the people of Israel. Their entire religious identity was upended, and every waking moment of exile only confirmed *this is not where we are supposed to be. This is not right. This is not God's plan for us.*

But now listen to what Jeremiah says when he opens his mouth with a word from God Himself.

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile: Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'

So God commands the entire remnant of Israel to essentially build up the city and make it nice and serve it. Notice he didn't say country. He said city. The place you actually live in. That's where change should be poured in, and where change will actually come out.

Jeremiah 29 summed up is basically saying 'you want to get out of exile? Be a really, really, really good neighbor.'

And how does Jeremiah define being a good neighbor? Simple: blessing others. Genuinely using the life and mechanisms and resources at your disposal to allow all the boats to rise in the tide.

That call is upon you today as a Christian. Bless your city. Plant gardens, and feed people with the fruit of them.

And interestingly, loving our neighbors is actually what politics is all about. The root of the word is *polis* — Greek for city. It reminds us that we do not live alone. There are other people out there – neighbors,



according to Jesus. Politics requires us to think about them. It requires us to think collectively, not just individually.

We tend to think of loving our neighbors in personal terms — like cooking a meal for the new mom next door, or taking care of our property so it's good for the neighborhood. But politics enables us to love our neighbors on a systemic level — like supporting a nutrition program for thousands of new moms, or taking care of the environment so it's good for the world.

To love our neighbor is to want our neighbors to have the same opportunities, the same freedoms, and the same protections that we enjoy — even when those neighbors are very different from us. It means when I step in the voting booth I'm not simply asking which candidate will do right by me, but which will do right by my neighbor, even the neighbor who lives in a different neighborhood than I do.

Let's make this super practical and real. Maybe that means you vote for a certain city councilman even though it might disadvantage you, because you know it will bless your 10 neighbors and their kids. Maybe that means you go to a church that doesn't quite 'meet your needs' but you know your gifts and service will be of more help there in that community. Maybe you intentionally think about and lay aside things that benefit you only, but not others.

Because that's what the guy we say we follow did and asked us to do. He even went so far as to 'enter our experience', and understand where we "sit" as people.

He wrapped himself in flesh and blood and walked among us!

Theologians call this the incarnation, but the word I prefer is embodiment. As the Message translation so memorably puts it: "The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." Can you say you are following in His footsteps?

Here's the truth--many churches have gone to heroic lengths to disciple and form their people to be faithful in their marriages and families. Or in their place of work. But we are malnourished and completely under-served and under-resourced regarding what it means to be a disciple who loves their neighbor well.

And that is the purpose of the First Principles Project.

We will not be telling you how to vote. We are asking a deeper, more fundamental question and holding you accountable to very specific non negotiables. How can we regain a vision for our higher calling as Christian citizens? How can we make sure we are loving our neighbor by our political choices? Why and how should we engage in public life, and how can we do it in a manner that reflects that way, and that truth, and that life of Jesus all at the same time?

It is going to take time to reground ourselves — this won't happen overnight, it will take years and maybe even decades — but without starting somewhere and sometime, we won't ever get there.



How do you love your neighbor? Be a seed, not a weed.

A weed grows fast. It's usually not full of beauty. It chokes out other lives. But the main thing? It tends to have a weak root structure, given its speedy growth and lack of depth.

Sadly, for most Christians our political life is a weed, and the way in which we engage or talk to or about others in the public space is weed. It doesn't belong in the garden and it is choking out the life of others. Not to mention it's not pretty or does not inspire beauty and goodness. It feeds no one. But most of all? Our political formation is weak and has no root structure. A little bit of fire and the weed is consumed instantly. A little bit of testing and it withers.

But true faith in the public square? True political formation? It's the mustard seed.

Small. Non obvious. Ordinary. No sign of worldly power. But it holds immense unseen potential — over a long period of growth and watering and years of 'input' it begins to 'output' as a tree giving shade and blessing to any people around.

In this regard, I think of the words of Jesus in Matthew, where the Kingdom of God is likened to a small seed that grows to be a large tree "where many birds of the air can find shelter."

But before we get back to *our* Kingdom tree — let's remember, there are other trees out there — institutions that provide shade and shelter in a fallen world.

Political institutions, when they function properly, are meant to parallel the "sheltering" aspect of the Kingdom. Notice Jeremiah didn't command the exiles to tear down the homes and gardens of the Babylonians. He simply called on them to build homes and gardens of their own, that reflected the beauty and abundance of their God.

So let's not waste our energies tearing down the trees that others are building, even when they don't provide all that we might wish. Let's focus on planting Kingdom seeds that will grow into Kingdom trees, and bear fruit, 30, 60, and 100 fold.

Remember, a tree is not exclusive about who can find shade underneath it's canopy. Anyone can come. Anyone can eat. Anyone can rest underneath.

And while we are on the subject of trees . . . Students of history — and fans of the musical *Hamilton* — know that George Washington was fond of quoting a particular passage from Micah.

Almost 50 times he referred to Micah 4:4 — "*they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid.*"

The passage from Micah refers to a peasant farmer liberated from military oppression, but Washington used the idea more broadly, to ensure that people could achieve a sense of security and peace. Perhaps the



most famous (and poignant) use of this passage was when he wrote them in a letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island. After the horrific persecution of the Jews across the globe, he wanted this group of marginalized people to know they had a home here, in the land of the free.

Those words are essential in a nation founded on pluralism. James Madison wrote that a good government is one that controls “the violence of faction” — doesn’t that terrible phrase describe the almost violent division of this moment?

That’s a picture of what it means to be a good Christian neighbor. We should take it upon ourselves to make sure other Americans feel comfortable in their own homes, in their own communities, without being afraid.

It’s an upholding of the dignity and sacredness of every human that has been distinctly Christian since the Roman empire. Early Christians were known for saving children who had been abandoned to die under a common Roman practice. They were also known for risking their own lives in order to care for strangers who had contracted diseases. Those the rest of society scorned, Christians cared for. At first Roman society, which did not believe in pity, looked down upon Christians for the practice. But so many people saw something compelling in this Christian love for each individual person that the empire began to convert.

In approximately AD 360, Roman Emperor Julian was attempting to inspire a pagan revival. He looked at the obstacles created by the Christian witness, and observed the following.

Why then do we think that this is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause?

He went on to say the Christians of his time “*support our poor in addition to their own.*”

So let’s recall — love of neighbor has been a core tenet — a first principle you might say — of all Christian moments of awakening and renewal.

We have covered a lot of territory over this series, and lots of important and lofty ideas and how to apply them in public life — but at the end of the day, it all comes down to some basics.

Are you going to see the neighbor in your community as one made in the image of God, and on that basis deserving of every ounce of love you can manage?

I am reminded of C.S. Lewis in his great book *The Weight of Glory*, where he provided the perspective many of us lack a lot of the time.



“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the . . . person you talk to may one day be a creature which . . . you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, to some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

“It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

Remember that, as you proceed in this political season and beyond, and act accordingly — in the Kingdom we are called to live in, there are no ordinary people, and no one of us has ever talked to any person that is a mere mortal — we are all designed and reflect a portion of the eternal God.