



Sunday, September 15, 2024

***Do Unto Others* Kindness Campaign: KINDNESS**

“Kindness and the Kingdom” | Ephesians 4:25-32, Matthew 7:12 | Charlie Berthoud

We are halfway through September, and the season of autumn will soon be upon us. The changing of the season brings several changes for us, some of which like and some not so much.

This new season means:

- School has resumed!
- Sweaters and blue jeans will be coming soon!
- It’s almost time for raking leaves!
- Football has begun!
- Pumpkins ... and pumpkin spice lattes!

As if that’s not enough excitement, with September and October **we are in the election season!**

We have 50 days to go until the election. We already have ads on TV and the internet. We’re getting phone calls. And I hear the doorbells have been ringing as well. All of this will increase in the coming weeks.

While we might get overwhelmed and exasperated with all the political noise, we need to remember that it is a good thing that we live in a country where we can vote and where we can express our opinions, where we can campaign for candidates.

Given all that we decided to do some campaigning here at Covenant. Did you see our campaign signs out front?



We are not campaigning for particular candidates or political party. Instead, we're campaigning for the sake of faithful Christian living and for the sake of God's kingdom, God's reign, God's new way of being.

Today we begin our KINDNESS campaign, and the inspiration comes from the teaching of Jesus who said, according to both Matthew and Luke: "Do unto other as you would have them do unto you."

In more contemporary language: Jesus said, "Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets." (CEB)



With the KINDNESS CAMPAIGN, we hope that we can be kind to each other in this stressful and challenging time, just as we hope people will be kind to us.

In the coming weeks, we'll be "campaigning" for COMPASSION, JUSTICE, SHARING, and more.

The biblical roots for kindness go back to arguably the most important Hebrew word in the Bible: HESED.

HESED is translated as steadfast love, or lovingkindness, and is regularly understood as a foundational attribute of God.

We see HESED, God's steadfast love clearly in Psalm 136, which is a celebration of creation and of Israel's history, with the refrain in all 26 verses: God's steadfast love endures forever.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.

<sup>2</sup>O give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.

<sup>3</sup>O give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
for his steadfast love endures forever;

The essence of our faith is recognizing and rejoicing and remembering this HESED, this steadfast love, this lovingkindness of God. AND we then let this HESED, this lovingkindness soak into our hearts and change us, so that we are more loving and more kind.

In other words, we're **learning God's love and we're living God's love.**

Our campaign is about predicated on us being people who know we are loved and in response we live as new people--welcoming God's gifts of kindness, gentleness, justice, respect and more, towards the goal of making this world a better place.

Our scripture reading for today comes from the little book of Ephesians, a general book on the Christian life. If you're new to the faith, or curious about it, this is a good place to start. It's got lots of good content, and it's short!

Chapter 3 Paul talks about being rooted and grounded in God's love. With those roots, we can become new people.

In chapter 4 he writes about what new people look like, letting go of the old life and taking on the new life. Shedding our skin as it were. This is why traditional baptismal liturgy involves a change of clothes. As baptized Christians, we step into new life putting the old life behind us.

So, our reading today might sound like a to-do list, but it's really a picture of what the new life is meant to be. Listen for the contrasts between old and new in God's word from Ephesians 4. And notice the conclusion with the focus on KINDNESS.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Who has a relative or friend or neighbor with slightly different political views?

Emotions are running high, because we care about our country and our world, and with all our different perspectives, we want to make things better for ourselves and hopefully for our neighbors as well.

Borrowing the words of Paul, we have plenty of bitterness, wrath, wrangling, slander, and malice in our society these days, particularly in our politics.

If we're serious about taking on the new life, we should not be adding to all of that negativity.

Having opinions is fine, but being rude, self-righteous, or snarky isn't.

In this stressful time, with people hurling insults at each other, I think Ephesians 4:29 might be a good prayer for us. The text says "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths..."

With slight modification, it becomes a prayer for us:

Let no evil talk come out of **my** mouth,  
but only what is useful for building up,  
as there is need, so that **my** words  
may give grace to those who hear.

What if we took those words and taped them to our bathroom mirrors, and prayed them every time we brushed our teeth the next 50 days?

THEME It's important to remember that none of us has a monopoly on truth. Theologically, the Bible reminds us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That's all of us, not just the people of the other political party.

If anyone was justified in demonizing an entire group or political party, it would be someone who experienced a Soviet gulag, but even Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn didn't go there. He wrote:

"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts."

Each of us needs to start with ourselves.

So in Lent, we pray with Psalm 51, "create a clean heart in me O God".

And we pray with Ephesians 4: "Let no evil talk come out of my mouth; help me be kind."

As God's people, we need to listen carefully and graciously and kindly to other people. Can I get an "amen"?

But that's not the end of the sermon. There is more that needs to be said.

Kindness is vital. Avoiding evil talk is vital. Being a good listener and being open to different perspectives is vital.

But that doesn't mean you need to remain silent.

In our reading today, Paul says "be angry but do not sin."

Earlier in the chapter, Paul urges us to speak the truth in love.

When we are faced with danger or injustice or outright evil, it is more than appropriate for us to be angry and to speak out, and to speak the truth in love.

So, in this tense political climate, it seems to me that we need to do all that we can to be rooted and grounded in love, in God's hesed, so that we can be kind and gracious

and loving, so that we can be good listeners and so that we can then have an opinion and act on it.



In any situation, especially in our divided and tense political climate, we as Christians need to be clear about where we're going and what we're doing. Jesus gives our goal, our purpose, our direction.

In a word, our purpose and our direction is the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is the focus of a timely and deep book published this year called *Jesus and the Powers*.

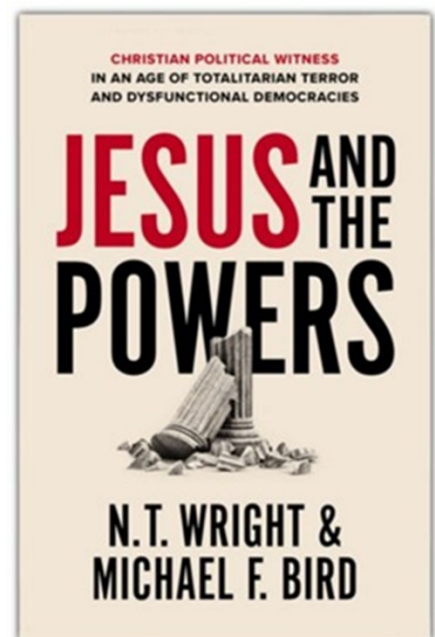
This book isn't a liberal or conservative book. Instead, it's about the urgent need for Christians to be engaged politically.

Yes, you heard me correctly. Christians should be involved politically.

The book is subtitled *Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies*.

Right in the beginning of the book that make the bold claim for Christians:

"In a time of fear and fragmentation, amid carnage



and crises, Jesus is King, and Jesus' kingdom remains the object of the Church's witness and work."


So, if we're focused on the kingdom of God as our goal, then we need to be involved in neighborhood meetings, civic associations, and political campaigns. We should be in the proverbial room where it happens. They write:

"Christian faith is meant to be a public faith, for the common good, which compels us to do good, to make good, and to build good in private and public endeavors." P. 150


THEME Sometimes we falsely equate the separation of church and state—which is good and vital and necessary—with separating faith and politics—which is impossible if we're authentic about our faith.

We don't want a theocracy, we don't want the government telling us how to practice our religion (which means we should not be posting Ten Commandments at schools). But we do want our politics to be informed and energized by our deepest held religious convictions. For us as Christians we know Jesus focused on poor people, hungry people, and oppressed people.

This explains why the Presbyterian Church made a commitment to the Matthew 25 initiative, which includes the goals of:



Building congregational vitality  
Eradicating systemic poverty  
Dismantling structural racism



So, it's OK for Christians to be involved in politics, inspired by the vision of God's kingdom and guided by a spirit of humility and kindness.

And this is hard, because good and faithful Christians have different opinions on abortion, on immigration, on the economy, and on a variety of issues.

While Christians hold various opinions on the issues of the day, the authors of *Jesus and the Powers* argue persuasively that we as Christians across the world need to unite in support of healthy representative governments, with checks and balances, and limits on power.

They make a strong case for liberal democracy as the best vehicle kingdom like values to thrive, so with democracy at risk in so many places, their book is rather important. The authors are concerned that the world as a whole is in as precarious a place as it's been since the 1930s. We have concerns in the USA, but this isn't a book exclusively for an American audience. The USA isn't the only country where democracy is being threatened.

N.T. Wright is based in England, and Michael Bird is in Australia. They have both traveled extensively, and they know of the chaos of the world today.

A section in the middle of the book begins with "The gospel calls us to believe in Jesus Christ, to belong to the Church, and to build for the Kingdom." Then they go on to say:

Your faith is your defiance against the idols of this world. Your love is your rebellion against the powers of this evil age. Your church is not a retirement village for moralizing geriatrics.

Your church is supposed to be more like a boot camp for soldiers of Jesus who go out into the world wearing the full armor of God, preaching reconciliation with God, loving their neighbors, sowing good deeds in the soil of hurting hearts, and becoming the scourge of the corrupt and the champions of the weak. (p. 100)

We live in a time where some prominent politicians talking about dictatorship and setting aside the constitution and retribution against political enemies, there are legitimate concerns about the future of our democracy here in the USA.



We need to be aware, and we need to speak out—with kindness and with conviction.

So, with 50 days until the election here in the USA, my campaign speech is this.  
Democracy is imperfect but wonderful. Let's protect it.

Let's keep listening to each other about the issues of the day.  
Let's be kind with our words, our deeds, and our lives.  
And let's seek God's kingdom, of justice, righteousness, peace.

Let us pray.

I invite you now to join me in a sung prayer with one verse from “God of Grace and God of Glory”, a hymn written in the tumult of 1930 by Harry Emerson Fosdick. We're just going to sing one verse, but it's good to know each refrain asks God to grant us wisdom and courage

God of Grace and God of Glory

God of grace and God of glory,  
on thy people pour thy power;  
crown thine ancient church's story;  
bring its bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
for the facing of this hour,  
for the facing of this hour.