



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 34

NEW SERIES 2017

ISSN 1937-8386

Opening Convocation

Inconvenient Truths

James F. Kay

Fall Opening Communion

Dreams and Realities of Community

M. Craig Barnes

Spring Opening Communion

Deadly and Life-Giving Words

Eric D. Barreto

Lectures

Populism, Patriotism, and the Preacher

Angela Dienhart Hancock

Moralistic Therapeutic Pietism

Amanda Drury

Commencement Address

The Foolish Call to Love

M. Craig Barnes

© 2017 Princeton Theological Seminary

The Princeton Seminary Bulletin is published annually by Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. Issues can be accessed digitally at: <http://journals.ptsem.edu/>.

Populism, Patriotism, and the Preacher

Angela Dienhart Hancock

Angela Dienhart Hancock, Associate Professor of Homiletics and Worship at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, delivered this lecture during the fall conference, “Civil Courage: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and American Politics Today.” This conference, held in September 2016, focused on ways the church could address the disturbing rhetoric of the U.S. presidential campaign. This version of her lecture has been revised since the 2016 presidential election, but full audio and video of the original lecture is available on our [Multimedia page](http://av.ptsem.edu) (<http://av.ptsem.edu>).

We dread presidential election years in my house. As the only Democrats in a fervently Republican extended family, my husband and I brace ourselves for the inevitable email forwards pointing out the error of our ways. We receive books in the mail from well-meaning relations—books about how liberals are ruining America, and by extension, the world. We can count on phone calls that feature laments about taxes, environmental regulation, health care reform, education, terrorism—phone calls that will end up in a heated partisan stalemate if you don’t have the self-control to change the subject quickly enough. Visits with my parents, especially in election years, require pre-visit talks in which my husband and I remind each other that nothing good will come from talking about politics or religion. Don’t take the bait, we urge each other, it just ruins everything and changes nothing.

Last fall things were different. Quieter. No books in the mailbox. Friendly phone conversations with minimal lament. Only one provocative email forward. We should have felt relieved, I suppose, but somehow, we didn’t. Radio silence is not necessarily a good sign, as that lone email forward—replete with its conspiracy theories—amply demonstrated. Our complete inability to find any political common ground in my extended family is even more mystifying when you consider that we all ostensibly share some pretty significant theological common ground. Every last one of us disciples of Jesus Christ, active in churches rooted in the same tradition, reciting the same creeds, singing the same hymns, reading the same Bible. We all fall into the category so scrutinized by pollsters minding the “God gap”—that is, we all attend religious services at least once a week. So, how is it possible that we are completely unable to talk theologically about politics?

Searching for an answer to that question is one of many things that led me to study the political behavior of the German church in the 1920s and 30s, and the theologians who either blessed or challenged the conflation of Christianity and nationalism at that time and place. Why did the Christians in Germany see the same political developments so very differently? Why did so few recognize the danger posed by National Socialism? Is there anything we might learn from that situation in the midst of this troubling political season in our own country? How can preachers and other concerned Christians be courageous civil witnesses at such a time as this?

LOOKING BACK

In many ways the average German protestant of the 1920s was primed to respond to the appeals of the parties of the right. Raised as loyal subjects of a monarch, many were skeptical of democracy. Humiliated by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, many were angry, bitter, demoralized. Enduring the trauma of hyperinflation and appallingly high unemployment, many watched savings dwindle away. And they also had one eye fixed on Russia, and all that had happened there: a government overthrown, a brutal civil war, the story of the night Bolshevik soldiers dragged the former royal family from their beds and shot them in the basement. Countless Russian civilians had been tortured and killed, property confiscated. The stories haunted the German imagination. The formation of the German Communist Party in 1918 and the scattered revolutionary uprisings from the left which occurred in Germany in 1918–19 only increased the anxieties. Even the Social Democrats who supported moderate reform rather than revolution would be regarded with suspicion by right-wing Germans from then on. Day after day the newspapers fueled German anxieties about Communist violence—nothing sells papers like fear.

So the average German had three questions which became more pressing with each election cycle: Who is to blame for the mess we are in? Who can prevent a Russian-style revolution? Who can restore Germany to its former God-ordained glory? Answers to these questions, then, were what Germans listened for as they evaluated political parties. They sought the most satisfying answers in relation to blame, protection, and restoration.

The parties of the right had clear responses to these concerns, and the National Socialists in particular had a winning formula. Blame for German troubles largely fell on two categories of people: 1) those with suspected loyalties to something other than the German nation: Communists, Socialists, Catholics, Jews, foreigners, and pacifists; 2) those perceived as “elites” in German society, including the liberal politicians associated with Weimar democracy, and again, Jews. The National Socialists convinced more and more people that they were the only ones capable of protecting Germany from Communist aggression. And Hitler certainly offered a positive vision of a new Reich, glorious again.

Of course, every political party in the Weimar Republic identified enemies, placed blame, and promised a better tomorrow. Competition for votes was fierce. Military metaphors, hyperbole, slogans, insults, dire predictions and threats were everywhere, mixed with sweeping utopian promises. From 1931 to the end of the Weimar Republic, as the depression deepened and the violence escalated, politicians, the press, and the regular people engaged in an all-out war of words. Public spaces were plastered and re-plastered with campaign posters, party “gangs” looked for trouble in the alleyways, uniformed party militias marched through the streets as if to war, and the papers screamed partisan accusations. Pathos was everywhere. How did the German Protestant church react to all of this?

By 1931, many were torn between appreciation for much of the Nazi platform and discomfort with their coarse rhetoric and aggressive style of campaigning. Though there were a minority of left leaning clergy who voiced opposition to the Führer and his ideas, there was little common ground on which the right and left wings of Protestantism could test the political spirits together. There was no sense of a shared Christian identity that transcended partisan political

commitments. Consciously and unconsciously the church's language about God and itself had been infiltrated by the dominant political rhetoric of the day. The language of *Volk* and *Kampf* permeated everything.

Why did most Protestants support right wing political parties? For the same reasons other Germans did. They longed for rebirth, renewal, revival, community, strong leadership, and unity. Taking their country back, making it great again. And along with those shared longings, references to the "unGerman" enemies of the *Volk* were usually not far behind. The doctrine of the orders of creation gave the dominant faction in German Protestantism a theological reason to sanctify the nationalism it felt so deeply.

Everyone who has spoken at this conference has rightly been very careful not to make any simple comparison between Germany in the early 1930s and the situation we face in the United States. We are not in a fledgling democracy. We should not cry "Hitler," of course. And yet. There are some undeniable resonances between there and here.

THE RACE TO THE WHITE HOUSE 2016

The vitriol of the 2016 presidential election campaign was hardly unprecedented in US history. Looking back at posters, speeches, cartoons, debates, of presidential campaigns over the past 200 years, there has been plenty of mud-slinging, insults, racism, blasphemy, xenophobia, sexism, hostility to immigrants, prophecies of doom, and downright lies. And we are by no means strangers to this kind of combative speech. Angry, aggressive, fact-challenged, hate-filled messages are commonplace just on the edge of official public life: the tee shirts for sale at the Tea Party kiosk, those offensive yard signs your neighbor gleefully posts from time to time, the venomous hyperbole spewing from trolls of every political persuasion on a website or twitter feed near you. We've known all this has been out there for a long time, and we may even slightly enjoy a little disruptive speech ourselves when the target is one we share.

What has changed is not the presence of such rhetorical tropes and transgressive images in American society but the fact that they issued forth from the nominee of a major political party. What has changed is that the hate speech we tolerate at the margins has moved to the center, and the usual way we informally and communally regulate the tenor of public speech has neither tempered these tactics nor discouraged would-be supporters. This time, nothing appears to be out of bounds.

It is hard not to be reminded of 1932, at least in this respect: we have a right-wing candidate—now President—who has enjoyed a rapid ascent to political legitimacy, who taps into already existing animosities toward government, minorities, and immigrants. Some of those most drawn to this figure and his promises have some real grievances. They have borne the negative consequences of decisions re: trade, etc. that have arguably benefitted the whole. There is a longing for restoration of the nation to what they understand as better times. And they have found someone who gives voice to all of these feelings and desires, even if statistics show some are uncomfortable with the way he does it. And every terrorist action, no matter how minor in effect, reinforces all of the above. Blame. Protection. Restoration.

So what is a concerned Christian to do? Join in the fray with some heated rhetoric of our own? Preach a jeremiad, denounce the deplorables, warn of the impending apocalypse? These are tempting options. But here, I think, is where two theologians who resisted National Socialism and its rhetoric—Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—have some wisdom to offer.

BARTH AND BONHOEFFER ON POLITICAL RHETORIC

Karl Barth was keenly aware of the power of political rhetoric. At the time Barth was working on the second edition of his Romans commentary, in the early 1920s, two political developments weighed heavily on his mind: German church support for the war effort and the grim aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution. The rhetoric that went along with these developments was full of pathos, Barth observed. By “pathos” he meant particularly religious “passion” for a political cause.¹ To speak with “sacred” pathos about a political conviction is to invest that conviction with eternal weight, to baptize it with absolute import, to grant it ultimacy. Barth heard this kind of sacred pathos coming from German nationalists blessing the war effort and from revolutionaries, overthrowing their oppressors.

But Barth has what seems like a counter-intuitive response to this kind of sacred political rhetoric. Instead of holding forth with your own sacred rhetoric in return, deprive them of their pathos, Barth writes. If you mirror the absolutism of ideologues, you will only give them fresh fodder, feed the flames. Instead, when you engage with political zealots, take eternal significance off the table. Starve them by withholding the opposition they crave. It is a strategy of non-violent resistance that meets the pathos of conservatism with what Barth calls the “Great Positive Possibility”—love of the other—and not with the pathos of revolution, which returns evil for evil.² If we acknowledge that our political judgments are always provisional, relative, partial attempts to discern what is good, then “pathos” in substance or in style would not be a faithful witness to the Godness of God.

Barth argued that when political views are held with deadly “eternal” seriousness, neither critical distance nor reasoned conversation about politics are possible. For Barth, the Christian community is called to be a witness in the political realm, to participate in public conversation with “a critical yet comprehensive generosity,” not from “outside” the world but from within, because both church and world are sustained by God’s reconciling grace.³

But to press Barth further, what does political conversation sound like when Christians wholeheartedly engage in public issues without absolutist rhetoric, particularly in the context of a democracy? We shall see.

At the University of Bonn in 1932, Barth volunteered to teach a course on how to prepare a sermon. It was an odd thing for him to do—after all, he was already teaching more than a full load, and someone else was already teaching the homiletics course. But that someone was a Nazi

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 235.

² *Ibid.*, 492. This love of the other “ought to be undertaken as the protest against the course of this world, and it ought to continue without interruption.”

³ Karl Barth, CD IV.3.2, 771.

sympathizer, and Barth felt that given the state of preaching at the time, intervention was warranted.

Broadly speaking, Protestant preachers in Germany thought that it was part of their calling to influence public life—morally, ethically, and politically. By the early 1930s, conversions of the political sort were impossible to ignore as young people rallied to the National Socialist cause. Many pastors had a nagging feeling that the “spirit” so evident on the streets was marching right past the Protestant church. What could they do?

Some of the sermons that survive from that time were clearly designed to urge support for the nationalist political cause. It is this instrumental understanding of the sermon—when preachers wield the Word of God like a weapon to achieve political ends—that Barth was concerned about when he talked to his students about the nature of preaching in 1932. As the Weimar Republic limped toward its demise, Barth increasingly argued for the freedom of the Word in contrast to the agenda-driven German Protestant sermon, so concerned with “relevance.”

But what does Barth suggest his young students do instead? Turn from the claustrophobic fixation on the German narratives of blame, protection, restoration and open themselves and their hearers to the wide, critical, and eschatological horizon the witness of the Scripture could provide. Barth insisted that the Old and New Testaments could move preacher (and hearer) from the narrowness of *Volk*, nation, and race to the wide-angle lens of God’s way with humanity. This did not mean he thought Scripture would have nothing to say in relation to Germany in 1932, indeed he told them, “application” to here and now was not only crucial, but would require “civil courage.” But discerning God’s claim here and now required renewed attention to how we listen to the witness of Scripture, especially when sacred political rhetoric has taken hold of us. And that brings us to Bonhoeffer.

Ten years after the National Socialist revolution, Bonhoeffer wrote a searching letter to friends from his prison cell, reflecting on all that had happened in Germany.⁴ The first thing that struck me as I re-read Bonhoeffer’s letter (known as “After Ten Years”) in relation to our present situation was his meditation on stupidity. “Stupidity,” he wrote, “is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice.”

What does Bonhoeffer mean by “stupidity”? The stupid person, he says, is impervious to reasons, facts, explanations. The stupid person has predetermined what is good and right and true, and no amount of protest or power can change that. Even if the facts of a counter-argument are irrefutable, the stupid person will simply dismiss them as irrelevant. To try and change such a person’s mind by giving reasons is pointless, and Bonhoeffer says, dangerous. Stupidity is not so much an intellectual issue (lots of smart people are stupid, he notes)—people are made stupid by external conditions, by other people, by historical circumstances, especially in relation to what he calls an “upsurge of power” in a political or religious context. “The power of the one needs the stupidity of others,” he observes, and it is not difficult to hear the reference to Hitler.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge, Ilse Tödt, and John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 37–52.

Stupid persons will be very stubborn about their views, even aggressive, but we should not confuse this with independence. Rather, Bonhoeffer sees stupid people as victims—under a spell, blinded, captured, abused. Talking to them is not really talking to *them*, Bonhoeffer says, because all they can do is repeat the slogans, sound bites, talking points, of the rhetoric which has possessed them.

It turns out that there is actually a significant amount of empirical research to back up Bonhoeffer's claims about how partisans behave. People who identify strongly with a political party are not persuaded to alter their views by rational arguments, not even when confronted with indisputable evidence. In the fields of moral and evolutionary psychology, research has established what happens in the human brain when presented with a moral or ethical issue. It turns out that nearly all people have an immediate intuitive reaction to such a dilemma, and then they construct a rational argument which justifies their intuitive reaction.

Where do these intuitions come from? They are formed over time. Shaped by what we are exposed to. And what we are exposed to depends in part on what we choose to be exposed to and how we interpret what we encounter. The dynamic known as “confirmation bias” is the tendency we all have to seek out, interpret, and recall information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs. While Bonhoeffer contends that a “solitary” person is more resistant to stupidity on account of the absence of peer pressure, today we may need to qualify that. It seems a “solitary” person can be ideologically hijacked just as easily in front of laptop screen or cradling a smartphone as in the company of others.

But Bonhoeffer was right: especially in the context of absolutist rhetoric, we will not be able to argue our way to agreement. And it's important to note that although Bonhoeffer is exasperated with the stupid people of his day, he ends his discussion on a more positive note. Stupidity is not a permanent condition. It infects some of the people some of the time. And there is always that hope that liberation will come.

Bonhoeffer's diagnosis was that most of those made stupid in the Third Reich would not be liberated internally until they were liberated externally, but he leaves open the possibility that the “fear of the Lord” could lead to wisdom, even in captivity.

A moment ago I spoke about Barth's discussion of the wide horizon of Scripture, and the way it provides crucial perspective in relation to our more “local” political standoffs. But in “After Ten Years,” Bonhoeffer subtly prompts an important question in relation to the wide horizon: who do we stand for and with as we point to the story that qualifies and relativizes all the stories we tell to justify our intuitions? Bonhoeffer calls us to stand alongside, with, and for the particular others who are, as he describes it, “below,” that is, to stand with those who suffer. We are not Christ, redeeming the world, but we are called to the “true sympathy” grounded in Christ's love for all who suffer. We can be called to sympathy and subsequent action second-hand, by hearing about experiences of others, Bonhoeffer writes.

In the little paragraph eventually published along with “After Ten Years,” Bonhoeffer expresses gratitude that he has learned to see “the great events of history” from the perspective of the “outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled.” It is a list we

can easily populate with the groups and individuals demonized in the heated rhetoric endemic to our current political climate. Does it seem odd that the same Bonhoeffer who describes many of his contemporaries as “stupid people” would go on to lift up sympathy as essential Christian response to others?

But Bonhoeffer not only calls for sympathy toward those who suffer, for those experiencing history from below, but also for the very people who have been made stupid. In a different way they too are victimized, he thinks, and this is important when we consider how far our sympathy should extend to those we disagree with today. Bonhoeffer gives us no justification for the demonization of those in ideological captivity. Love, he writes, is “the will to enter into and keep community with them,” that is, with those we might be tempted to despise. The very ones who express views we find deplorable. Impossible! Yet Bonhoeffer reminds us that “through contempt for humanity we fall victim precisely to our opponents’ chief errors.”

From Barth and Bonhoeffer then, we have heard some advice for resisting sacred rhetoric: With these gleanings in mind and our present political situation in view, we are ready to be concrete: what specifically is a preacher to do at such a time as this?

PREACHING IN THE KEY OF GRACE

We might begin by considering what a preacher *can* do, legally speaking. Some of you may be familiar with the 1954 change to the U.S. tax code known as The Johnson Amendment. The amendment states that 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations cannot campaign for a particular political candidate, nor can they intervene in a campaign to stop a particular political candidate—they cannot endorse or oppose candidates with their written or spoken words nor with their money. The penalty for violating the amendment is possible loss of tax-exempt status.

What does the Johnson Amendment mean for churches and preachers? Preachers cannot endorse or oppose particular candidates for office, nor can the church engage in activities that demonstrate bias for or against particular candidates. But pastors can take positions on political issues and preach about them, and congregations can host non-partisan voter registration drives, present public forums on political issues, invite candidates to speak (if all are invited), and publish what are known as “voter guides,” as long as they focus on issues and information rather than advocating for or against candidates.

For many of us, wary of campaigning for specific candidates anyway, the amendment isn’t anything to get worked up about. In a very recent Pew survey, about two-thirds of all churchgoers agree—they don’t think that churches should endorse particular candidates, though more than half think it is good for churches to discuss social and political issues.⁵

In light of this data, it is odd that in recent years, this fairly obscure scrap of the tax code has become a cause célèbre for certain right-wing Christian groups. The Alliance Defending Freedom was founded by 30 conservative evangelicals in 1994 in order to fund legal action to

⁵ “Many Americans Hear Politics From the Pulpit,” Pew Research Center, last modified November 2, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/08/many-americans-hear-politics-from-the-pulpit/>. In the same survey, more than one third said they have heard preachers talk about political issues in the last few months, but only ten percent have heard a sermon which included support for or advised against supporting a particular presidential candidate.

fight what they perceived as growing threats to what they call “religious freedom.” Among their targets: the Johnson Amendment. Every year since 2008, the group has encouraged pastors to participate in “Pulpit Freedom Sunday” by endorsing a political candidate from the pulpit during a Sunday worship service and then sending a video record of the event to the IRS, in hopes that punitive action and presumably a public outcry would follow. How many churches were penalized for violating the amendment on Pulpit Freedom Sunday so far? Zero. Instead, they received a form letter from the IRS, thanking them for their interest.

So it is likely a preacher *can* get away with using the pulpit to denounce one candidate and/or endorse another.⁶ But in the context of a political environment rife with partisan rhetoric already, that doesn’t mean preachers should. And what are we to make of the fact that most of the people who actually go to church, right and left, would rather preachers didn’t? To answer that question, we need to look more closely at who is in the pews.

On average, only about fifty-five percent of the Americans who are eligible to vote for president do. Churchgoers are somewhat more likely to vote than non-churchgoers, but still, it means that a certain percentage of the people in church on any given Sunday don’t pay much attention to politics. Maybe they’ve got a lot of things going on—or maybe they are so cynical about the whole enterprise that they tune it out.

For those of us who are very attentive to every development in domestic politics, it is good to remember that there may be others in the sanctuary who are not invested to the same degree. Of course, that number will vary from congregation to congregation. You may be a part of a local church that identifies itself with the left or the right, theologically and politically. That doesn’t mean there aren’t outliers there, but statistically churches that embrace an activist or advocate stance attract others who lean in the same general direction. In a congregation that does not land somewhere definite on the political landscape, or that identifies itself explicitly as a theologically and politically diverse community, things are more complicated. In some churches it can be difficult for pastors to find out exactly what church attendees think about social and political issues because everyone is so careful to preserve the peace. A Facebook post, an email forward, a whispered comment after the service—these may be the only clues to political persuasion unless you pursue the matter one on one. Sometimes you won’t get the full picture even then. In other places there are a few boisterous partisans (and sometimes more than a few) who are open about their political convictions, but this may discourage rather than encourage others to share their views.

So, why don’t churchgoers want pastors to endorse particular political candidates in their sermons? There could be many reasons, some I’m sure bound up with perceptions about what it

⁶ On May 4, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order (Exec. Order No. 13,798, 82 Fed. Reg. 21675) instructing the Secretary of the Treasury to ensure that the Department of the Treasury does not take “adverse action” against religious individuals or organizations who speak about moral or political issues where such speech has “not ordinarily been treated as participation or intervention in a political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) a candidate for public office by the Department of the Treasury.” This does not constitute the repeal of the Johnson Amendment (something which the President does not have the authority to do), but appears to affirm the existing practice of non-enforcement. For the full text of the May 4 executive order see: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/04/presidential-executive-order-promoting-free-speech-and-religious-liberty>.

means to preach the gospel. But one reason that makes sense to me has to do with what is likely to happen in the different kinds of churches I just described. If you are addressing a politically *homogenous* congregation, then endorsing a candidate is just preaching to the choir. If you are addressing even a minimally politically *diverse* congregation, by making that explicitly partisan move you are putting the “bully” back in “bully pulpit.” Neither one of those paths is particularly courageous or unique in our present rhetorical environment, where pastors regularly endorse candidates during campaign seasons, making it clear which team is your team, drawing the line between comrades and enemies. So if not endorsement, what is a preacher to do? A preacher who knows something must be said at such a time as this? A few suggestions:

Be a window, not a mirror

As we’ve seen, our political discourse is full of absolutist rhetoric. Equivocation, compromise, humility—these things don’t win elections. And it can be so tempting to respond to the heat and anxiety of the moment with passionate jeremiads of our own. Denouncing what is wrong with society or government or the other political “side”, either challenging what we consider to be the narrow-mindedness or moral failings of our hearers, or firing up the like-minded by railing against the evil of a shared enemy.

But I wonder if Barth was onto something: maybe we should not just mirror the rhetoric already in evidence. Maybe we should not just offer another editorial with some God talk mixed in. After all, every day new opinion pieces appear lamenting all that is wrong with one political perspective or the other. Every day new blog posts, articles, and tweets appear arguing for or against policies, reacting to the latest political outrage, issuing dire warnings and assigning blame. All of that is being done already, and at least some of it by people who know a lot more than I do.

What would it mean—since all of that is already covered— what would it mean not to be a mirror, reflecting back the same, but to be a window? To bear witness to the God who is God as those who are not God, and thus without “sacred rhetoric”? What would it mean to deprive our inner partisans of their pathos, acknowledging the relative and provisional nature of all our human assessments and convictions, and thus create a space to model in our preaching a more generous kind of theological reflection on politics?

It may involve a very difficult surrender in our current political environment: laying down our weapons. Giving up the idea that my goal as a preacher is to change people’s political minds, to influence how they vote, to convince those made stupid that my political vision is the true and faithful one, or at least to make sure the ones who do get it vote. It means when I am led to address social and political issues in my sermons I give up the idea that I am speaking *for* God, but instead pointing to the God who has, does, and will speak the Word of grace, Jesus Christ.

Grace has implications for our struggles here and now, personal and political, systemic and individual, of course. But when a wise preacher thinks after grace in relation to social and political issues, she doesn’t confuse her thinking after with grace itself. She leaves room for the possibility that there are things she hasn’t thought of, she leaves room for the possibility that grace could find another way.

Let the Bible breathe

One way to preach during an election season might be to preach topical sermons specifically designed to address the issues you deem most important between the sermon and the next election cycle.

Churchgoers tell researchers that prior to last year's election they heard preachers weigh in on immigration, "religious freedom," abortion, homosexuality, and environmental issues in their sermons.

But I think Barth was right to be wary about approaching the task of preaching "topically" at such a time as this, that is, approaching the task of preaching with an agenda all figured out, hunting through the Bible for a text which will second the motion you already have in hand. This may be particularly tempting for those who do not preach from the lectionary, and thus have the task of selecting a text week after week—who can blame such preachers for searching for something that seems to be relevant for the moment?

But it is especially at times of political turmoil and widespread anxiety that the Bible can provide that horizon that puts parochial frustrations and fears into perspective. It is a reminder that our local stories have a place in a much bigger narrative, a narrative of cosmic proportions. Though nothingness and chaos perpetually threaten to absorb the world, the triune God holds open a space and a time for creaturely life, bringing the story of the world with all its twists and turns and rough edges to a good end. The story is that big.

So rather than hunting for a text that lets you say what you already wanted to say, or domesticating the lectionary text by making it say what you already wanted to say, let it be its strange self. Let the strangeness of its imagery, language, plot, serve to disrupt your usual way with words, the newspeak which dominates our discourse. It is good for us to ask ourselves from time to time just how much of our pulpit rhetoric is infused with partisan code words. Shaped decisively by the language games that we learned from the media we consume. Rather than translating what we meet in the Bible into those familiar categories, let it remain somewhat undomesticated, even reveling in the places where there is an awkward fit between then and there and here and now. Most preachers know that the awkward places are often the most fruitful by the end of sermon purgatory. This in no way means you are not listening to the claim of the text in relation to the particular political situation all around. But it does mean you are listening, not just proof-texting.

Prophesy without contempt

And in fact there may be times when, after deep wrestling with the claims of a biblical text and some aspect of the contemporary context, you are called to speak "prophetically," unmasking an idol, naming an injustice or wrong, clearing away some cobwebs.

But when it is time to speak as a prophet, remember that prophets speak from and with the people they speak to. Prophets are for their people—that's why they are against them. It is a loyal opposition. It does not work at all if I don't know and love the people I am addressing. I was struck by the powerful title of Cathleen Kaveny's new book *Prophesy Without Contempt*. Kaveny observes that the best jeremiads, the ones that did what they were supposed to do, were

delivered with generosity, even toward opponents. Lincoln's vision, Martin Luther King's dream—these are examples of what she means.

Such prophesy imagines a future with a place for all, a place incomplete without the adversarial other. Prophets name what has gone wrong, yes, but also what the grace of new beginning might look like. When the time comes to speak as a prophet, you will know, but when you do, be the loyal opposition, full of hope, and always without contempt. "Whoever despises another human being will never be able to make anything of him," Bonhoeffer wrote from prison. "The only fruitful relation to human beings... is love."

Expand the cast

Love compels us to consider the thing that troubles many of us the most about the rhetoric of this political season, in particular that of Donald Trump: the dehumanizing things he has said and continues to say about groups and individuals, the slurs and slanders and innuendos and insults. Is it far-fetched to say that such language games leave traces in us? Even if we intentionally reject them?

There is some empirical evidence that this is precisely the case. Words shape our perceptions. Now a preacher could just say that such hate speech is wrong and that is that. But resistance to the residue of such rhetoric requires something more, something deeper than just condemning the rhetoric itself. It requires a homiletical reversal. A counter melody. And that is something Bonhoeffer can help us with, I think, when he reminds us that people can learn to sympathize second-hand.

If you are kidnapped, do you know what experts say you should do? As soon as you can, tell your captor your name, tell about your 4 year-old daughter, tell about how you used to go fishing with your Dad, tell about how your cat begs for Fancy Feast. Why do experts advise you to disclose as much as possible about the details of your life to your abductor? It's a lot harder to hurt someone, a lot harder to ignore someone's pain, when their humanity is on full display. How does a preacher counter the rhetoric of demonization, a rhetoric that so relies on distance and generalities and stereotypes? By showing the richly-textured humanity of those so demonized. How might a preacher do this?

It is long-standing homiletical wisdom that sermons should show us what difference the gospel might make to someone here and now. Every good preacher knows you need to show and not just tell. So every sermon will have a cast, one way or another. Jesus will be there regularly, of course, along with the many characters who run to meet us in the pages of Scripture, but good preachers know there should be others there in the sermon too, people closer to home. Sometimes giants appear: your Mother Teresas, your Martin Luther Kings, but (if you are wise) also people a lot like the people who are sitting there listening week after week.

But if we are to disrupt the disturbing rhetoric that demeans and demonizes and diminishes certain groups of people, then the cast of characters that populate many of our sermons will need to expand. There may be some new featured players. There will be one of the young mothers from Mexico, who used to bring me small homemade gifts when I taught in an inner city school in Santa Ana, California. There will be someone like the woman in her sixties who asked for

prayers in church in Pittsburgh the other day, supporting her disabled brother, who just found out she will be downsized because the company she works for is moving her department overseas. We will spend some time following Ameen Ashraf, a Muslim man who serves meals to the homeless in the Bay Area out of his roving bright yellow food truck known as “Mercy on Wheels.” And so many others.

Some of the people you describe can be real people you encounter or read about, some might be people you invite hearers to imagine with you. It’s not that you are preaching sermons *about* these cast members, but you are allowing the wide story of God’s way with human beings to intersect the richly-textured humanity of those under attack. This constitutes a more powerful and reparative response to dehumanizing rhetoric than simply denouncing the rhetoric itself.

Cultivate a deliberative community

Finally, what preachers say in those twenty or so minutes between the singing and the prayers is important, yes. But most of us know that deep consideration of the theological dimensions of the many complex social and political issues of any given time and place is impossible in twenty minutes a week, especially when they are issues about which Christians disagree. For many of us, recent events have brought the sad realization that it is unlikely that mainline protestants, Catholics, evangelicals can come together and speak with one voice about hate speech, even though the majority, left and right, express dismay about it to pollsters. Just a simple declaration: God loves all people. Because we believe that, we do not practice or condone the rhetoric of hate. Not toward immigrants, not toward Muslims, not towards presidential candidates, and not towards those we disagree with. Period. We couldn’t make such a statement because some would see it as partisan. We couldn’t do it, because there is not enough trust, not enough shared identity, even for that. And by the way, I’m not blaming conservatives for feeling that way. Only a Christian community accustomed to regular generous theo-political deliberation across differences could create the degree of trust required for a joint statement about the rhetoric of this election season or support for things that should be resoundingly trans-partisan like Black Lives Matter.

But deliberation takes skills, and those skills take practice. We couldn’t speak as one voice in relation to hate speech because I’m willing to venture that we (liberals and conservatives and everything in between) have not been practicing. We are unprepared to talk to each other about the intersection of faith and politics in many of our churches, just as my extended family is unprepared to talk to each other about such things, in spite of all the things in common. Why is that?

James K. A. Smith describes places like shopping malls and sports arenas as religious sites, noting their liturgies, their rituals, the way they form our moral instincts and shape our desires.⁷ And we might add our habitus as consumers of political culture to his list, regardless of whether we participate in political liturgies via television, podcast, radio station, print media, or smart phone. If we were to take the “practices inventory” that Smith recommends, how much of our

⁷James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 88.

time, attention, energy is spent each week as consumers of, or participants in, partisan liturgies?⁸ How much of the time are we speaking the language of left or right, learning to see the world through the categories that meet us repeatedly, showing us some things but hiding others from view? Is it crazy to suggest that this may result in a degree of malformation when it comes to a) our own “stupidity” and b) our ability to be sympathetic, even towards other people who also have been made stupid by their political grazing habits, to some degree at least?

The omnipresence of sacred rhetoric about politics is not the only factor that makes it difficult for American Christians to talk about public issues. Political scientist Diana Mutz explains that in relation to the citizens of other countries, Americans have fewer face-to-face conversations with people whose political views differ from their own.⁹ This is not to say Americans don’t talk about politics, but the empirical evidence strongly suggests we talk about politics with people who in large part share the views we already hold, where deliberative skills are relatively unnecessary. Mutz think churches have great potential as places where cross-cutting talk could occur. So why don’t such conversations happen in many of our churches?

Because Americans avoid political talk in contexts where they value community and harmony above all else, places like churches. Christians either select a politically homogenous church that at least in part mirrors their views, or choose a congregation that may include diverse views about which no one speaks, for fear of disturbing the appearance of harmony. So not only are American Christians ill-suited for deliberation due to the malformation that comes with constant exposure to absolutist rhetoric about politics, they also are unlikely to have much experience of the kind of conversation in which critical and generous deliberative skills might be honed—they either choose to worship with like-minded others, or they don’t talk about politics at church because the risk of conflict is too high. Given all these reasons theo-political deliberation doesn’t happen, how could we change that? Well, I think we just have to start doing it. Even if it means starting small, finding a few people in our congregations who have different political perspectives, but who trust each other enough to sit down regularly with the Bible and a newsfeed and exchange reasons, stories, fears, and hopes.

CONCLUSION

Courageous witness in the context of the sacred rhetoric of populism and patriotism and fear is rooted in the wide horizon of Barth and the sympathy of Bonhoeffer. The key of grace means the modesty that comes with knowing your political convictions are provisional and relative, because only God is God. The key of grace means affirming that every person is a beloved of God—the ones demeaned and mocked and threatened, and even the ones who have been made stupid. To speak in the key of grace means that even when a prophetic word is necessary, it is always without contempt. It’s easy to forget that the protection of hate speech under the First Amendment is one of the things that *is* truly exceptional about the United States. The ACLU position regarding Nazi groups in the US is that the best response to bad speech is more speech. Yes. Good. But what language can we borrow to deprive absolutists of their pathos? To be a window and not another mirror? It’s not just that we want people to stop using the rhetoric that

⁸You can find Smith’s “practices audit” in *Desiring the Kingdom*, 84.

⁹Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51.

demonizes and demeans or approving of those who do. We want to address the feelings and motivations that lead people to use these words about other people. And for that, there have to be places where people can trust each other enough to talk about those feelings and motivations. And the Christian church should be one of those places.

A genuinely counter-cultural rhetoric does not consist in taking up absolutist speech in our pulpits to defeat absolutism but precisely in depriving it of its pathos. A genuinely counter-cultural rhetoric can only take root if we practice, passionately, patiently, cheerfully; on folding chairs in church basements, the Bible in one hand and the newsfeed in the other, saying our prayers and trusting one another enough to talk about the two most dangerous things in the world: religion and politics.