

AMERICAN IDOLS – PART 4

TEXT: John 4:1-42

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on August 28, 2022

Talking About Religion and Politics

Polite society has long held that religion and politics should be off limits for discussion. My family did not get that memo. Thanksgiving dinner was uniquely bad, usually instigated by my grandfather. Grandpa wrote his elected representatives at least weekly about everything from national monetary policy to the quality of soap in the men's room at the senior center. So, when we gathered for dinner, he had no qualms about sharing his bad takes as he passed the gravy. My mother and aunts always...always...took the bait. But it wasn't only my grandfather. One Thanksgiving, when things were going unusually smoothly at dinner, my uncle said to no one in particular, "So, what do you think of capital punishment?" Then he just sat back with a sly grin and watched the fur fly. I watched in anxious silence.

While I didn't engage with my opinions, I did engage my analytical skills, which is how I cope with anxiety. And, over time, I began to notice some important things. The first thing I noticed was that, after the very predictable yet serious arguments over dinner, everyone settled in with no hard feelings afterwards—some helping clean up in the kitchen and others watching football in the living room. That taught me some important things about family.

Just as important, though, was my observation that all of the heated arguments about virtually the same topics, year in and year out, didn't move the needle a bit on either side. Their in-your-face style of engagement didn't, even once, result in a changed opinion, or even a more nuanced argument. Like a bunch of turkeys strutting and posturing for each other, I came to see it more as ritual than substance; something that reinforced the identities of family members but never actually influenced hearts and minds. The topics were substantive, every one affecting lives in the real world. But the hot-headed engagement didn't help a single soul and resolved nothing beyond passing the time between the mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie. And neither did my silence.

Maybe experiences like that are why many choose not to discuss religion and politics at all, especially if the carving knife is still on the table. But by making those topics off-limits, we've created an opening for the powerful idols of wealth, status, and celebrity to move in, unchecked, and choke off the very areas of life that are most necessary to our freedom and well-being. And by walling off any talk of politics in religion and any mention of religion in politics, we have neutered the ability of either to be an effective check on the other. We are reaping the whirlwind of that today.

Squashing those topics out of general conversation has also made us far less able, and frequently unwilling, to engage them when our own safety and security depend on us doing so. We are either silent, as I was every year, or we are bleating out the same opinions into the void—never thinking beyond the sound bite of our talking points and never really hearing what is at stake for anyone. In the meantime, both religion and politics are spinning out of control, and the most extreme ends of both are joining forces. If we just clutch our pearls because it's impolite to talk about politics and religion, those pearls will be all we have left in short order.

But to say we *should* talk about them doesn't mean that there aren't any rules of engagement or dangers. Talking about it doesn't mean turning either church or coffee hour into my family's Thanksgiving slugfest; but neither does it mean staying silent, as I sadly did, when people like my grandfather blame every social ill on a particular Black community in Bridgeport, Connecticut. So, this morning I want to talk about talking about it. Where are the lines? How can we be effective? And what does "being effective" even mean?

Our first clues come from the story from John's Gospel about Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This is the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in any of the Gospels, making it all the more remarkable that

the conversation is not only with a Samaritan, but with a Samaritan woman. Jesus is breaking two taboos right there. And, after beginning with Jesus asking for a drink, they end up talking about the very core of the hatred between Jews and Samaritans—the question of where it’s appropriate to worship, on Mt. Gerazim where the Samaritans had their temple or in Jerusalem. It’s not a frivolous question. They are debating the political and religious differences that have made them enemies for almost half a millennium.

If the Samaritan woman had been too polite or fearful to bring up the beating heart of their conflict, we would never have gotten the critical teaching of Jesus in this passage. Likewise, if Jesus had crossed into Samaria sporting a “Mt. Gerazim is for Losers” T-shirt, the woman would have likely waited to go get water.

But when Jesus shunned the practice of the Jews to avoid Samaria and instead crossed the border, and when he sat at the well honoring their common ancestor, Jacob; Jesus made a positive statement about the value of the Samaritan town and its people. And when he asked a woman for a drink, knowing they would need to share a common cup, he acknowledged their human kinship, despite the fact that women were considered property. That welcoming gesture gave her permission to speak her mind and even be plucky enough to bring up a contentious issue. Was she likely ever in her life to have a chance to ask a question of a Jewish rabbi? It was laughable to think so. But here she was.

As a result, we get a lesson that can serve us well in our polarized world. Jesus begins with the Jewish position on the worship question. He tells her, “Yeah, you Samaritans are wrong. Jerusalem is the right place to worship.” But he quickly leaves that in the dust and tells her that the physical location of worship is really a straw man. “God is spirit,” he tells her, “And those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Boom. Centuries of animosity and fighting about the proper location for worship is knocked down, all because of an unplanned conversation about a drink of water between two people who usually would not go near each other. Jesus stays there for two days, and the entire town comes to see Jesus, not as a Jewish rabbi who had no business being in Samaria, but instead believing the woman’s suggestion that he might well be the Messiah that Jews and Samaritans alike were expecting.

How this conversation happens and how Jesus responds to the woman contains probably the single most important lesson in talking about religion and politics or any emotionally charged issue: The place every debate must begin is distinguishing our *positions* from the underlying *interests*. That’s actually the most important thing in resolving any conflict and is what never happened at Thanksgiving at my house growing up. In the bestselling book about negotiating, *Getting to Yes*, the authors explain how this works.

They use the simple conflict of two people in a room with an open window. One person wants the window to stay open and the other wants it shut. On its surface, that’s an impossible situation to resolve, because the window can’t be simultaneously open and closed. All the two people can do is fight about who has the right to have the window in the position they want. The only way to resolve that question is if someone wins and the other person loses.

The book directs people to forget about their *positions*—open or shut window—and instead ask about their *interests* and look for a common thread. WHY do they want the window open or closed? Maybe the common interest behind their positions is that they both want to be comfortable, but one is hot and the other is cold. By itself, that shift in focus doesn’t solve the problem. But it does reveal the real concerns underneath, which then opens up a different, and typically larger, set of solutions. The solution in the example could be moving the seating or finding a sweater. With *positions*, the solution has to be win/lose; by looking instead at the underlying *interests*, win/win possibilities emerge. A win/win solution not only resolves the current conflict more easily, but it builds trust that make future conflicts easier to resolve.

That’s the kind of reframing Jesus does with the Samaritan woman when she raises their centuries-old conflict about the proper location for worship. As you would expect, Jesus affirms the position of the Jews. But then he quickly moves from their different *positions* to their common *interest*, which is the desire to worship well and truly.

By affirming that God doesn't have a physical location—"God is spirit"—and affirming that the honest desire of our hearts for God is what makes for "true worship," Jesus is putting aside their incompatible positions. God, ultimately, doesn't care about where we worship but rather about the inward state of our hearts when we do it. With that shift, they are no longer a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman arguing about who is right. They are two people of faith who want to worship truly. They have a common interest, and what flows from that shift is not a move toward a different conflict, but to another belief shared by Jews and Samaritans—that a Messiah is coming. And the entire town is changed as a result.

The very first barrier we encounter in being able to have constructive conversations about either politics or religion today is being able to put aside our positions and find our common interest. We dress ourselves, and often our vehicles, in the symbols of our tribe. We stay in our bubbles and never venture across the border into Samaria, except maybe to taunt or even kill some we think are heretics. We refuse to go in, sit by a well from our common history, and share with someone our tribe considers "less than." We disdain to drink from a common cup. As long as that remains unchanged, we will remain unchanged; and our downward spiral will continue.

A couple of weeks ago I was reading a thread on Twitter by a well-known Democrat as he described a visit to the grocery store. On his way in, he noticed a woman asking people for help to buy baby formula. He made a mental note, went in and bought formula to bring to her. When he came back out, the woman was talking with another woman, who wore a bright, red MAGA hat. He went quickly over there, fearing that the woman asking for help might be in trouble. But, when he got closer, he saw that the woman in the MAGA hat was opening her wallet and giving to the woman who had asked for help.

His thread on Twitter shared his sense of shame, as he recognized his own hypocrisy. As someone who prided himself on being able to see past a person's outward appearance to their need as a human being, he had applied that skill to only one of the two women. His tribe had taught him to dehumanize anyone in a MAGA hat; the very kind of dehumanization he prided himself in opposing.

The intractable divisions we have today are stoked by those protecting idols. If they can keep us in our bubbles and make us so disgusted with the other side that we refuse to see the humanity we share, no one will ever have real dialogue and discover we have common interests. Everyone will stay focused on shouting their positions from their own territory and no one will dare to cross the border and ask, "What are your hopes and dreams for your life? How are you feeling threatened, and how can I help?"

Idols want to prevent even a hint of such conversation; because every time we find something in common with another person in a conflict, there is a chance we might pull back the curtain and find the idol; to discover that something has been given more power and influence than it should have.

One of the most insightful quotes I've ever heard comes from the late psychologist and sociologist Dr. Amos Wilson who said, "If you want to understand any problem in America, you need to look at who profits from that problem, not at who suffers from that problem." Instead of shaming someone who is addicted, suppose we ask, "Who profits from that addiction?" Who profits from our broken healthcare system? Who profits from letting anyone with a pulse buy and immediately use weapons of war on our streets? Who profits from letting the climate spiral out of control? Who profits from our overflowing jails? Who profits from throwing up roadblocks to even talk about racial discrimination? The ones who suffer from those problems are obvious; but who profits? Answer that, and the solutions will be plain as day.

Following Jesus into Samaria is the boundary we must cross to find our common interest and start asking those questions. How do we talk about these things not just privately but in public? Aren't there some boundaries we need to keep? Why, yes, yes there are. Stay tuned. Amen.