

Every four years in this country, we do our best to tear the country apart with something called an election. An election is a process whereby candidates and parties win elections by dividing the nation and rendering it nearly ungovernable. Sadly, politicians and parties are happy to use religion in their quest for power, and more sadly, religions are happy to use politicians and parties in their quest for power. Perhaps I'm overstating the case. But perhaps not?

As a result, sometimes these days, when someone asks if I am a Christian, I don't know what to say. The word Christian can mean polar opposite things. It can mean Christian nationalism, and it can mean a commitment to separation of church and state. It can mean you see refugees and immigrants as invaders to fear — or you see them as neighbors in need. It can mean you see LGBTQ people as beloved members of the family or as an abomination to God. It can mean you love your neighbor of another religion as yourself, or you do not because he or she is of another religion. It can mean that you repent of the racism of our past and present or that you minimize it. It can mean you practice nonviolence or that you see God and guns as best of friends. It can mean you care for the Earth and want to protect it from human exploitation, or it can mean you believe God plans to destroy it soon, so we might as well do our part to help. It can mean you read the Bible literally or literarily. Under the same blanket called Christian, a lot of strange bedfellows sleep.

It often feels like the word Christian has become little more than a bumper sticker, more of a shallow political statement than a deep spiritual one. The same, by the way, seems to be true of the word Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist.

So maybe you have asked yourself, “How do I identify myself in conflicted times like these?” I'd like us to consult today's gospel passage for guidance to help us answer this question. So let's take a closer look at the first sentence:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:

You hear that word first then ... and you ask what happened before? In the previous chapter, Matthew 22, Jesus found himself in a caldron of controversy, controversy that was both religious and political. It turns out that Jesus' nation and religion were at least as divided as ours.

You had two main parties: the Pharisees over here, and the Sadducees over there. The Herodian party liked the Sadducees better, and the Zealot party liked the Pharisees better, but they also had their quarrels with their allies. And then there were the Essenes - they didn't like anybody, except their fellow Essenes. And sometimes they didn't even like them!

In a sense, each faction wanted to use Jesus for its own purposes. That's why, in the previous chapter, members of the two main political parties tried to test him with tough gotcha questions ... Depending on his

answer, they would use him for their agenda - or they would cancel him and attack him... They would either use him as a pawn or defeat him as a rival and threat. That's the context for Matthew 23.

I hope you feel it: In a way, we in our conflicted times are in a very good position to understand Jesus' situation. Because today's parties, religious or political, are not very different.

Someone makes a racist joke and they are testing you to see if you laugh or if you shake your head and offer a word of resistance. Someone mocks people who are “woke” and they're testing you to see if you agree with them. Someone makes a joke or casts an insult - about Trump or Biden or whoever - to test you to see if you are on the red team or the blue team. You know how it feels to be tested. You may even know what it feels to do the testing.

It's in that context, by the way, that Jesus is asked the question, “What is the one single greatest commandment?” Jesus says, “Love God.” It was a clever answer, because everyone would have agreed with it ... Pharisee, Sadducee, Zealot, Herodian, Essene. If he would have stopped there, we could have called him a clever politician. But then he had to add this: “Ahhh ... there is also a second commandment, and it's equally important to the first.” Everyone would have been confused ... a second commandment equal and inseparable from the first? What could it be? And then he continued: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That would have made everyone equally uncomfortable, because he didn't say love your Pharisee neighbor, or love your Sadducee neighbor, or your Essene or Herodian or Zealot neighbor. He said, “Love your neighbor - no exceptions, no discrimination.”

You may have heard the saying attributed to Einstein, that “no problem can be solved on the same level of consciousness that created it.” That's what Jesus is doing here. He is saying, You people are fighting up on this level. I want to invite you down to a much deeper level ... I won't play your game on your level.

Now let me pause for a minute. Because I imagine that many of you have been wondering, since I began speaking, where I stand. Am I on your liberal or progressive or conservative or moderate team? Am I red or blue or purple like you? If I am, you'll listen to me. If I'm not, you'll disregard me. And I want to tell you ... that way of thinking will not help you or any of us solve our problems. Our problem is not the other team: our problem is the fear, lack of wisdom, and hostility that exists on all our teams and between teams. If we want to get to a better place, we must descend to a deeper level.

So now in Chapter 23 Jesus speaks from that deeper level to everyone - to the conflicted, divided crowd, and to his disciples:

2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

Fascinating. Various factions have been trying to trap Jesus in saying something wrong. And do you see what he is doing? He is descending from the level of what you say to something deeper ... to what you do, to how you live. Not the words you preach, but the way of life you practice. Then he goes deeper still:

5 “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

So now, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. Both Pharisees and Sadducees and all the other parties are performers. That, by the way, is what hypocrite means: actors. They’re not trying to persuade their opponents: they’re simply showing off for their fellows on their own side. They want respect. Honor. Status. By the way, Phylacteries were little boxes that contained verses of the Bible. We can even use the Bible to enhance our status, Jesus says. Do you see it?

So Jesus continues:

8 “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. 9 And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

There’s Jesus, moving to a deeper level. If you’re looking for the right label - Rabbi, Father, Teacher - to make you important, to make you feel better than somebody else - you’ve lost the plot and missed the point. The point isn’t to be better than somebody else ... the point is to experience equality and solidarity and to seek the common good with everybody else.

Please let that simple thought sink deep.

In that light, in this conflicted time, I invite you to aspire to three things: First, to face a great temptation in conflicted times like these: the temptation to perform your wokeness or perform you maga-ness, to perform you conservatism or perform your liberalism or your centrism. To play a role, to perform for your peers. I invite you to name what that kind of performance is: it’s a vain attempt by your vanity to gain honor, status, and respect in your little in-group.

I think we all know this: if we need to put down others to lift our fragile ego up, if we need to create a dirty enemy to make us feel innocent and righteous, then we don’t know who we are. If we need a title to feel superior to others - rabbi, teacher, father, progressive, conservative, moderate, Republican, Democrat, Independent ... we are still working on the level that creates our problems. If we keep that up, we should remember Paul’s words to the Galatians: If you bite and devour one another, take care, lest you consume one another. We can’t solve our problems with the level of consciousness that created them.

“How to Identify Yourself in Conflicted Times”

Brian McLaren

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So here are three things I aspire to do in this election season. Instead of looking down on others for being on the wrong team, I want to take the plank out of my own eye ... to face my own shallowness and insecurity in needing to perform and prove myself to impress others on my team.

Second, I aspire to see others, not as enemies or opponents, as bad guys or idiots .. but as neighbors, equals, sisters and brothers, people whom I do not need to impress or intimidate of defeat, but rather, people I want to serve. If I give myself permission to deny the dignity and humanity of people of the other party or of both other parties ... I shouldn't call myself a Christian. I should just call myself a Democrat or Republican or Independent, because that's the script I am performing by. I might be listening to a cable news pundit or political candidate, but I'm not listening to Jesus.

And third, I aspire to care less about the political team I'm on, and care more about actually being on Jesus' team. He was up to something the rival parties around him never fully understood. If I join him on that path it will mean that I will do what Jesus did: not play games on the shallow level of those around me. I will strive to be, with Jesus, a humble servant of all, all people, all my neighbors, red or blue or purple or green or whatever ... no exceptions.

That will allow me to function in these conflicted times as something more than a performer, seeking status and honor in a futile contest that makes us all losers, whoever wins. That will allow me to function as a real and humble human being, with real love for my neighbors and for the God who loves each one of them, no exceptions.

That is, I believe, good news for conflicted times.