

## PASTOR'S NOTES. Doing Religion and Politics Differently, Part 4.

Here are some of the ideas from the previous notes. I invite you to disagree with any of these, but I would love to hear your reasons:

- Everyone is in our mission field.  
*“Go and make disciples of all nations...” (from Matthew 28:19)*
- We will not reconcile all our differences with reason.  
*Our ideas are all a unique combination of experience, emotion, and reason, and we were never meant to agree on everything. (Romans 14:1-12 and other passages)*
- No principle is more important than persons.  
*Jesus came not to promote ideas, but to save people. (many Bible verses)*
- Group identifications serve some initial purposes, but we must go past them.  
*“Neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female...” (from Galatians 3:26-28)*
- Something about your position (on whatever issue) is wrong, or at least incomplete.  
*Our culture has made assumptions about science and groups of people that are at least dubious, and likely false.*
- Most likely, you do not fully understand another person's ideas or position.

It is to the last two of these I want to give a little more attention.

Back in February 2020 (before COVID hit us), the SOS Class, one of Maple Street's adult Sunday School classes, studied controversial issues of our time. We created a survey on the subject of human sexuality. Class members anonymously filled out the survey of 41 statements relating to sexuality, sexual orientation, the role of society and the church. This was not truly “scientific;” more than 41 statements would have been better, and some of these might not have been well-worded. Still, we discovered that this class had a wide-range of opinions about sexual issues. Not only that, each person's answer sheet was unique: no one agreed on all 41 statements. What this tells me is that few hot-button issues are a simple either/or matter; if we think so, we not only don't understand the people who disagree with us, but we don't really understand the people who agree with us either.

There have been more scientific studies on the matter. Studies have asked people their position on an issue and then asked them how they thought most other people felt about it. For example, when they asked people to describe the successful life, they thought other people want to be famous. But about themselves, famous was low on their list. In other words, people might say, “Fame is not important for me, but it seems like that's what everyone else wants.” The irony is that almost everyone agrees with the statement. So does that mean that we're all lying about wanting to be famous (that we really do want this), or does it mean that we've just been trained to think this way about people – what scientists call “a collective illusion.”

I suspect both are true, but especially the latter. We accept things we privately disagree with, because we wrongly assume that most everyone else thinks that way. Politicians have depended on this: the bigger the crowd at rallies, the polls that tell people who “actually won” the debate, or how voters are trending, these are all about creating the impression that our candidate is the “people's choice.” This

also affects the decisions of local communities, school boards, and even church boards. With our internationally-connected media, any person's opinion can be magnified all over the world. 10% of the people account for 80% of the social media posts. All of our media purposely or accidentally creates an image of our world that is at the least inaccurate, or at the most deliberately false.

How do we deal with this? There's not a lot that we can do on the international scale, or even on the national scale. But it might help to look at how God addressed this: He sent Jesus, not to preach internationally to the Roman world and beyond, but to address people in a small part of the world, in one-on-one situations, small groups, and occasionally larger gatherings. So, for now, we must let the wider world go, and start with honest, one-on-one conversations. We need to listen to each other carefully, without jumping or assuming how another thinks on this issue or how it relates to other issues. The reality is that we have all been trained to judge others by one standard, and ourselves by a different one:

*"For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."*

Matthew 7:2 (NRSV)

We can say, "I don't judge," but that's probably not truthful. We do make judgments, and others judge us. But if we are to be judged, we want it to be with compassion, by those who truly care about us, who are invested in our success, and who will carefully try to understand our actions and our ideas as fully as possible. This, therefore, is the kind of judgment you should make with others.

Let me leave you with one thought. Jesus speaks about hell in a number of places, but there are only two passages where He specifies the actions that put you there, or put you in danger of being there: in Matthew 25:31-46, He talks to people who fed Him when He was hungry, clothed Him when He was naked, etc., and those who did not. The other passage is this:

*"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."*

Matthew 5:21-22 (NRSV)

It sounds like a lot of us are in danger, or "liable to the hell of fire," especially as our world encourages us to treat "them" with contempt. So the conversations I am talking about are not optional.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kam'.