

**Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White:
Are You a Liberal or a Conservative?
January 7, 2024
Pastor John Mars**

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church. Happy New Year! I want to read a passage of Scripture today that comes from the book of Matthew, chapter 23, beginning with verse 23.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you neglect the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out gnats and swallow camels.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs. You look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

Some bright, cheery words to begin the new year! I hope the necessity of them will be clear in just a little bit.

A long time ago in a land far away, first day of college for me, first class: Biology. The professor comes in, puts his stuff on the desk, doesn't say a word, but goes directly to the blackboard. (Now, this is back when dinosaurs still roamed the earth, and they were using blackboards and chalk.) He goes to the blackboard, and he marks off the four corners of the blackboard. And he turns to us, and he says, “That represents all knowledge.” And then he puts a barely perceptible dot in the middle of the blackboard, and he says, “That is what you know right now.” And then he drew a big circle around our little dot, and he said, “That's what I know.” And then he drew a circle inside of his circle, around our little dot, and he said, “If you pass my class, you will know this much. Let's begin.” And that is how I started college. It was a little bit intimidating. It was a little bit rattling. But he was right, and he stretched us. And what we found out is we really didn't know all we thought we did, but when we got out of his class, we knew a lot more than we did when we went in.

Today we begin a new year, 2024. Can you believe it? We begin a new series. The title of the series is: “Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White.” We're going to use numerous sources as we address this topic. The major sources are going to be, as always, Scripture. And if anything does not conform to Scripture, we will not use it. But there are four books that we are going to be drawing from: two by the Reverend Adam Hamilton, who is the pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the United States, in Kansas City; and two by the Reverend Andy Stanley, who is a Southern Baptist minister in Atlanta, Georgia. All four of these books address the topic that we're going to be looking at in January and February, to some degree or another, and that is polarization and extremism. Have you noticed that in our world? When your pastoral leadership team and I got together in late summer to plan 2024, the topic of polarization

and extremism came up again and again and again, and we decided that we must address it. So, in January and February we are going to be addressing this topic. What we're going to talk about is not all-inclusive, not by a long shot, but what we want to do is raise awareness, and raise awareness as to our role in addressing this in the church and in our society. Now, why are we doing that? Every year has the potential of being epic and being monumental, but in 2024 we're going to have the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, looking at a way forward after a season of disaffiliation. And we're going to have a little thing called a presidential election here in this country. It's going to be challenging not to get distracted, as individuals and also as a congregation, but we cannot afford to get distracted. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Period. End of discussion. That's what we do. We cannot afford to get distracted.

And so, we begin with liberal or conservative. Now, if I were sitting where you're sitting right now, looking at the crazy person in the pulpit, I'd be going, "John, have you lost your mind? You're going to do this the first Sunday of the new year?" And my response to you is, "Yes." I want to hit 2024 head on. We cannot avoid these topics. We've got to deal with them. We've got to address them. We've got to acknowledge them. And what is our response? Why liberal versus conservative? Here's why. My opinion: There are no more divisive terms in the English language, in the Christian Church, than liberal and conservative. They are more divisive. They have done more damage. They have divided us. They have separated us. Because whether you are liberal or conservative is not the issue. The issue is: Are you following Jesus Christ? That's the issue. As a trained counselor, I am trained not to use absolutes, but I absolutely hate these terms. There's no such thing as a pure liberal or a pure conservative. Liberal as opposed to what? Conservative as opposed to whom? I have a friend who says, "I'm not conservative. I'm just a little bit right of Genghis Khan." When I left the South thirty years ago, a lot of my friends and colleagues thought I was a foaming-at-the-mouth liberal. When I reached the Northwest, the Conference I'm a part of refused to ordain me the first time, because they thought I might be too conservative for the West. I hadn't changed. These terms are so relative, and they are so political as well. There are some at the extremes who believe that if you don't have a certain set of theological beliefs, that you are unpatriotic. There are people at the extremes who look at the other extreme and say, "I don't believe you're a Christian." And brothers and sisters, that should not be. I find the extremes, both extremes, scary.

Almost all of my ministry, I have had two core values. But about 15 years ago, God gave me a third, and that is directly related to extremism and polarization. My first core value is: People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care. The trick to that one is figuring out how to communicate that, how to communicate to people that you do actually care for them. My second one is: Trust God like it all depends on God, and work like it all depends on you. In my opinion, there are some ministers these days that look to me like they are so lazy, you have to drive a peg down beside them to figure out if they move during the day. Trust God like it all depends on God, and work like it all depends on you. The third one, God gave me about 15 years ago, and said, "This is what I want you to do." Now, this is me. This is my calling. I didn't say it was right. I said this is what God has called me to do. And here it is: I will endeavor to create a bastion, a haven, of moderate Christianity in the sea of extremism we live in, wherever I serve. Let me say it again. I will endeavor to create a bastion, a haven, of moderate Christianity in the sea of extremism we live in, wherever I serve.

Christians, in my opinion, must be bridge builders, peacemakers, not wedge makers. Our job is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is our job. We catch them; we let God clean them. Okay? Our job is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. And maybe I'm just not that effective, but I have not figured out how to make disciples of people I have alienated. And when you come down hard as a liberal, or when you come down hard as a conservative, you automatically exclude 50% of the people, and you cannot reach them. Our job is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is our job. The church is the church for everyone, or it is the church for no one. We can't afford to be exclusive. That means that liberals are valued here. Conservatives are valued here. That means that Husky fans are valued here, and Cougar fans are valued here. That means that Washington fans are valued here, and Michigan fans are valued here. For those who have ears to hear, let them hear!

I want you to remember, and this is specifically for Central United Protestant Church. I want you to remember why we were created. We were created to be "the church for everybody else." There were eleven very diverse denominations that were combined, in a grand attempt and a grand belief that we could put aside our differences and make disciples of Jesus Christ. That is who we are; that was why we were created. We can't afford to be exclusive. If we are exclusive, we reject our heritage and we neglect our purpose.

Now, all of that sounds fine, but the truth is Christians have a tendency to major on minors. We have our pet peeves that are really important to us, and not that important to anybody else. We have minors that we major on. We have a need to be right. And when it comes to our faith, we are characterized by a lack of humility. And that's "Amen," or "Oh, me!" but that's the truth. We are characterized by a lack of humility. That is why, in the United States alone, there are over 2000 denominations. That is why, in the United States, there are tens of thousands of nondenominational, independent churches. All the groups in all the individual churches believe that they are more faithful. They believe, in other words, that they're right. My belief is what Jesus said: We spend way too much time straining out gnats and swallowing camels.

In our passage of Scripture, Jesus is not addressing people on the outside. He is addressing people on the inside. He is addressing the spiritual, religious elite of his day. And if you read these (I only read three of them, y'all, and there are seven), he is ticked off. He is mad. Because these guys were doing just exactly what we do today: majoring on minors, judging people who don't agree with us, being obsessed with details, and missing the point. Tony Campolo and Brian McLaren have a great book entitled, "Adventures in Missing the Point." We do a lot of that. These folks were going to extremes. And Jesus said, "You're whitewashed tombs. You look good on the outside, but you're full of filth and corruption."

Folks, none of us has all the truth. None of us has all the truth. I thank God that this church is filled with a lot of very, very, very intelligent people. And I thank God for that. It makes my job easier. But, by definition, no matter how intelligent you are, you are still ignorant. I don't care how smart you are; there's a lot more you don't know than what you do know. None of us has all the truth. And so, when we come to our faith, we must come to it with humility. No one has all the truth. We must see, or try to see, other people's point of view. And humility is the key.

Life experiences should change us, not harden us. Unfortunately, many of us refuse to grow, refuse to change, refuse to develop, after a very short period of time in the faith. I don't know about you, but my faith is very different than it was when I accepted Christ at 14. I have grown some since then. I have learned some since then. I have changed since then. My truth is different. (Almost sounds heretical to say that, doesn't it? Doesn't it, just a little bit?) My truth is different. But it's not that God has changed. God's truth has not changed. God's facts have not changed. But I've changed, and my understanding has changed.

I want to make a statement here, and I'll make it a couple of times: There's no excuse for willful ignorance in the kingdom of God. There's no excuse for willful ignorance in the kingdom of God. Our faith must be flexible because of our ignorance. We don't have all the facts. And if you don't have all the facts, and you get another fact, that by definition changes you. Now I know, it's very unlikely that you're wrong. I know that. But entertain the possibility, be it ever so slight. That takes humility. And that is how we address, that is how we fight polarization, by seeing people through God's eyes, when He looks at me and He goes, "Bless his heart. He'll grow up one day. He's only 63." By controlling your tongue and your fingers, by forgetting about liberal or conservative and following Jesus Christ, by being bridge builders and peacemakers, by not majoring on minors but majoring on making disciples. And last but not least, by being humble about your certainty. Be humble about your certainty.

We begin a new year today, and I'm taking the sunshine as being an omen of things to come. I'm looking forward to a wonderful 2024! But let us resolve today not to get distracted, despite what happens in our world. Our job is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Let us not get distracted. Let's pray.

Lord, we face a new year with excitement about the possibilities, about the possibility of growing Your kingdom in this place. And Lord, please, if there is any hint of division among us, if there is any polarization that begins, point it out. Rub it out. Help us get it out from among us. So, Lord, we give you ourselves as individuals, and we give you ourselves as a congregation, to do Your work. In Christ's name, amen.