

# **The Sixth Mark of Discipleship**

## **Disciples are Civically and Politically Active**

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### *Luke 21:5 to 9*

*5 When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, 6‘As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.’*

*7 They asked him, ‘Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?’ 8And he said, ‘Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and, “The time is near!” Do not go after them.*

*9 ‘When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.’*

We have been taking a journey together as we consider the six marks of Christian discipleship. As you may recall, the first five marks of discipleship are as follows: disciples extend a warm welcome and hospitality to others, disciples worship the living God, disciples are devoted to service and justice, disciples are committed to learning and growing, and disciples are generous with their money. We now arrive at the sixth and final mark: Disciples are civically and politically active.

Our text this morning comes to us from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus makes clear that the world is falling apart. It is one of hundreds of very political passages in the Bible. This one was especially so. The Gospel of Luke was written not long after the temple was completely destroyed. Why did the temple collapse? Herod, in collusion with the temple power brokers, had turned the temple into an incredibly oppressive fortress that became a bastion of status and economic privilege. The temple elite had become addicted to Herod’s money but, in the process, the religious and economic power brokers sold away their souls and principles. There were a lot of Jews and gentiles who did not get even a very a small fraction of this Roman and Temple largess.

As the shine came off of Herod’s reign and his religious buddies, a Jewish revolt ensued which hastened a severe reaction from Herod who sought to crush the revolt. Amidst the conflict, the temple burned and was destroyed. The revolt came because less privileged Jews and other people felt that Herod and his pietistic cronies let the temple evolve into an elite economic fortress which excluded the poor and those less fortunate. So the Jews revolted. Jesus said “see this temple adorned with beautiful stones and dedicated to God, well the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are politically and civically engaged and we have our eyes trained to see struggle in our world where others might look the other way. We know that there are temples all around us which on any given day are falling down. I go to work every day, and I meet people who have watched their temples be destroyed. Their homes, their families, and their bodies fall apart. I meet people who felt at one time they had a piece of the temple with a good job in a corporation or government, which paid a good wage and benefits. A lot of people who find the temple of our market economy does not include them as the rich get richer, the poor get poorer and the middle class shrinks. As temples around us collapse, I think about the vows that we made when we were baptized.

We promised to do justice and to resist oppression as best as we were able. Jesus said in the wake of the destruction around him, that there are people who offer words of deceit and exploit the situation for their political ends. But in the face of all this spin and destruction Jesus asks us to see clearly and speak truthfully and act courageously. You promised and I promised.

But you know something? Christians are a really weird bunch. We become isolationists and can trivialize our faith. We wimp out and forget our baptismal promises. As we approach thanksgiving, how many of you are led to review the rules which go with your extended family gatherings? I know in a lot of nice religious families there is a general rule that you don't talk about politics or religion. You know how this goes right? As someone waxes on for an hour about their new dog or describes the mannerisms of their cat over the turkey, you could not be faulted for whispering in your spouse's ear at the dinner table, "for God's sake, if we can't talk about politics and religion, then what is there left to talk about?"

Sometimes our churches become extensions of our family systems. We don't talk about politics in church. Preachers work over time not to say anything that might offend someone or invite them to reconsider their position. We try to articulate every side of an issue declaring neutrality but never afford ourselves or others the space to say what we or they honestly think. Instead, we bore ourselves and other people by being coy, subtle, and opaque in our communication. Church has become a bizarre place where we avoid civic and political life and the commitments that go with it.

I am certain that our Congregationalist forebears would roll over in their graves, if they heard the advice dispensed in churches that we should avoid politics and civic engagement. Those Congregationalists built a lot of meeting houses where they could worship. But it was in those same meeting spaces that they would promote public conversation and govern their communities. In Massachusetts, the rule was that the town could not be incorporated until a meeting house for public worship was erected. If there was no church there was no town. Those meeting houses became a place where both worship and political organizing and town meetings took place. Some of the seeds of the American Revolution had their birth at many an organizing meeting in these meeting houses with preachers and lay leaders showing the way. For Congregationalists, your faith and your political life were intricately linked.

In the Nineteenth Century, in my old church, the Trinitarians broke away from the Unitarians because the Unitarians were not radical enough. The Deacons got together in the parsonage to form the Framingham Abolition Society. In the pulpit, you would hear fiery

sermons from the associate minister against slavery and the abuse of alcohol that was ripping apart many an American home. In our own church, General Otis Howard, went on to found Howard University, a distinguished institution, which educated African American's in the post reconstruction era. I am certain there were a lot of white people in Washington who were not thrilled with General Howard founded a black college. Another member here is Warren Austin, a Republican US Senator who was the first ambassador to the United Nations. Or Howard Dean, a current member who will be speaking here next month, was governor and became head of the Democratic party.

Holly Puterbaugh and Lois Farnham in our church had one of the very first civil unions in a church in this country. Adrienne Carr and Bob Lee conducted the service and arrangement for armed security had to be made because of the controversy. It was a great act of courage. It was tough but this church supported you both. And it was not so long ago, that there was a movement in town called Westward Ho which sought to get homeless people out of Burlington and send them west. Churches and other religious institutions in response controversially started the Joint Urban Ministry Project and COTS. I know how tough it is to start anti poverty projects which aid the poor. In my experience some of the nastiest fights in cities center on how we do or do not care for homeless people and what we do about affordable housing. Around every one of these people and movements there was much chaos and controversy that required political engagement and great courage. When we were baptized we said that we would resist evil and oppression and serve the lord. You promised and I promised. That's what disciples do. We are civically and politically active.

But in conclusion, we must ask: how do we do this work in our present time? First as Christians we have a duty to be present and show up. We are called to maintain and renew our democratic institutions. As Congregationalist we invented the idea of the town meeting and other structures for democratic decision-making. True to our congregational roots, the church should be opened up as a place for public conversation and public debate. Congregational meetings, where we can deliberate and vote, is a Congregational invention. We should also run for office and accept political appointments as so many of our fore bearers did. When it comes time to vote we should vote and we should be zealous in protecting the right to vote for others.

Second, we need to guard against elitism in all forms. In my first church, in Waukegan, Illinois the Ku Klux Klan announced they would march in the city. This became an occasion for the faith community to coalesce in having a unity rally. Planning that rally, I was introduced to a CL Fairchild who was the pastor of the Greater Faith Baptist Church a predominately African American Church on the Southside He introduced me to a lot of pastors of small storefront churches. His observation to me one day was this. "You know what the problem with you white liberal Christians? You spend your days studying a problem, you pass a bunch of resolutions, and issue a report. But where are you people? Why don't you come down to Southside, dine with us in our church basements, come to our revivals, then roll up your sleeves and get messy, speak up and lean on our politicians to do the right thing?" Pastor Fairchild, taught me that you can't be effective just reading a book. You have to show up, listen well, and speak up. You will only be credible if you are present. Pastor Fairchild's words remind me of Chris Christy said when he was asked how Republicans could better reach out to minority and immigrant voters. Coming off a landslide victory, Christy gave some simple advice. You have to do show up and do real stuff.

Pronouncements and a marketing plan without your presence and real action in these communities is completely worthless.

Third, our churches need to be places where we encourage preachers to help us all think deeply about the Gospel and apply that Gospel to our public lives. In our preaching and our actions in the community we pastor and we teach. We have opinions which, in our judgment, further the cause of justice in the name of Christ. The purpose of a pastor is not to get everyone to agree with him or her but to offer enough provocation touted in scripture to get people to think and act on their baptismal vows. We need to create spaces where we can have thoughtful and respectful debate about the needs and injustices in this community and how we can faithfully respond. We model this work through our own work in the public square and speak up on issues affecting our community, nation and world.

Fourth, Jesus reminds us that when we do this work, we will often be criticized and persecuted. You will not always be thanked. Some will feel threatened and try to discredit you. It is a risky business that our families and churches may be inclined to avoid to keep the peace. Jesus tells us they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. “16 You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name.” Now I would not inflict of this nature on anyone, but disciples should not be surprised to find themselves in the midst of controversy and conflict when doing work of significance.

At the same time, we must remember that controversial conversations do not have to degenerate. We need to create space for us to hear alternate view points and look for third ways to address difficult subjects. We need to create space where we listen well and allow people to speak courageously. Jesus will help. As Jesus said, “Make your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15 for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”

Finally, we should have hope. Jesus said that while facing these challenges, not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls. So think deeply how Jesus is calling you. Then show up, be present, speak your mind, listen well to those who disagree with you, and act and speak courageously. When the temple is collapsing, do not despair. Live into your baptism to resist injustice and evil and then act politically and civically. I promised and you promised in Jesus’ name. Amen.