

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, October 18, 2020

Make Love, Not Truth

Thank you, Scott, for the opportunity to contribute to this brilliantly conceived series. To start our exploration today, I thought it would be good to see a very brief clip from the documentary, “The Social Dilemma,” which you can find on Netflix. So let’s watch. [Play clip from “The Social Dilemma on political polarization and opposing facts/realities.] Thank you for indulging me in watching this clip. If you haven’t yet had the opportunity, I implore you to make time for this documentary because it really is a deeply clarifying film. I wanted to show this clip because I think it does a great job of making plain precisely the nature of the danger we face in our country—not just social media, as if that accounts for it all, but really the investment folks in this country have (and, let’s be real, it’s an investment we have, too) in laying claim to the truth. My side claims to possess the most pertinent facts; your side, the opposing side, claims to possess the most pertinent facts. But I know, even if I can’t say quite how I know, that your facts are not facts at all, but are instead propaganda, paid for by a very well connected cadre of elites who are working overtime to make sure that the truth, which I possess, does not get a hearing.

On and on, this debate rages, driving the ever-widening polarization that now threatening to rip our country apart. There’s no getting around it. As our country nears what is already a deeply contentious national election, we have great cause for concern. As ScottBitter and frequently violent disagreements are now an everyday reality, and civil unrest seems sure to follow whatever outcome results from November 3. I sincerely hope that I others who are sounding this alarm are making complete exaggerative fools

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of ourselves—that one day we’ll look back and have a good chuckle, “remember when that guy was being a total thespian and ranting madly about civil unrest?” I promise you if this is all nonsense, I will laugh right along with you. But regrettably, I think the opposite is likely true—that we aren’t alarmed enough. These tensions are palpable, and they ensnare even our churches as congregants find themselves positioned on opposing sides of the present political and cultural divide.

Of course, there’s nothing at all wrong with having different perspectives; indeed, our own denomination thrives on such diversity! The problem arises when we lose the ability to disagree in good faith. In our own time, impugning the motives of those with whom we disagree is a common and alluring temptation. Have you ever found yourself thinking something like this?: “There’s no way that person honestly believes what they are saying. They’re just selfish. They’re heartless. They’re evil!” I have to confess, I succumbed to this temptation just a few weeks ago when I was talking with my father, with whom I disagree fundamentally on just about every question of culture and politics you can imagine. He lives in Alabama, an entirely different world than mine. I’ll spare you the details of our conversation (and now I’m just being generous to myself; it was more sparring match than conversation), but suffice it to say I did everything you’re not supposed to do when discussing strong disagreements in matters of politics: I raised my voice, I talked over him, and I appealed to scientific authority. I wanted, no, I *needed* to *win*—for him to concede. Needless to say, that did not happen. And the only possible explanation for this had to be his motives. “Dad, you’re just too proud to admit that I’m right. You’re too stubborn. You can’t possibly believe what you’re saying.” I have bitterly regretted those words ever since.

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Obviously, this was not a proud moment for me. But when confronted with forcefully opposing views, it can be hard to resist such cynicism. This impulse can have the effect of hardening our faith into truth-claims, ideas by which we measure the sincerity or validity of other folks' convictions. You could call this a litmus test for discerning who does and does not possess the truth. How might we overcome such antipathy? I think Paul's letter to the young church he planted in Philippi can help us. That budding congregation was made up largely of converts from a broad range of philosophies, which were part of fully formed, embodied traditions (not just "schools of thought"). In other words, these congregants had deeply held beliefs, ideas, and convictions—about life, the world, the nature of good—that put them at serious odds with one another. It's one thing to get along with different folks in an intellectually diverse society; it's quite another to consider folks who have fundamentally different thoughts about the world your spiritual sibling and connect deeply with them on matters of faith, day in and day out. So it is not difficult to imagine what may have prompted Paul's concern for unity in the church. He recognized that the root of the problem was the absence of trust between various members of the church. Adherence to certain truth-claims or spiritual understandings thus came to rival genuine care and concern as the definitive marker of one's faith. The task before Paul, then, was to help members of the church probe the mystery of Christ's love, which could inspire them to deepen their connection and resilience as a community.

Perhaps the most radical suggestion Paul makes, one I suspect today finds great resistance, even among ardent Christians, is for church members to prioritize the concerns and interests of others above their own. This may seem to many of us wildly

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aspirational and even unhealthy. And perhaps it is. Or perhaps Paul has a very clear

sense of how to cut through the mutually assured distrust-ction of tense claims to

ultimate truth. For Paul, the way forward through bitter discord is to re/member our

place in the relational web to which we belong. In the end, this is what it means to “be of

the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord.” This is not about ideas,

doctrines, empirical reality, or principles. This is not about truth. This will scandalize

some people, but faith has almost nothing to do with beliefs about ultimate truth. Make

no mistake, the pursuit of truth is an indispensable part of our faith journey, and I would

be an utter fool to suggest otherwise. But what Paul, in effect, is telling the Philippian

church, is that the real work of faith unfolds in and through love, not attempts to

establish the truth. Faith is in the first place performative before it is propositional. We

demonstrate our commitment to the truth by demonstrating our commitment to one

another. We’re talking about no less than covenantal theology here, the very basis of

our denomination’s emphasis on being a united and uniting church. May we recognize

and seek—from God and in relationship with one another—to be people of genuine faith

and moral courage, so that we might repair the breach of broken trust in our deeply

wounded land. Amen.