

From Centrism to Solidarity

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[0 : 0 0] Hello, Table Church. My name is Anthony Parrott. I get to serve as one of the lead pastors, and I was not supposed to do this sermon. So this is the conclusion of our shift series, and we had invited a guest speaker to talk about five shifts in evangelicalism. I'd heard this talk actually in Denver. It's a wonderful talk, except our speaker got sick and was unable to do it. So I was going to do it. And I'd had this blog article that I was working on. I was like, I'll just turn that into a sermon. And then I got sick, and I still don't feel great.

But tonight is on leave, and I didn't want to dump this on anybody else. So here I am. So if I say anything today that sounds to you theologically suspect or offends you, you can blame the sickness. If you enjoy what I preach today, you can thank the Holy Spirit. So let's get into it. We've been talking about shifts in our faith. And before I give you the title of this final shift today, let me give you one of the more offensive sayings of Jesus. So a few weeks ago, our director of TableKids, Erin Byrne, she preached a sermon on multi-generational community, and she had talked about one of the sayings of Jesus that says, whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.

Talking about children in the kingdom of God. I'm going to look at the next verse. This is Matthew 18, verse 6. And Jesus says this, As for anyone who causes these children who believe in me to stumble and to fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be drowned in the bottom of the lake. Now, imagine, if you will, if Jesus were alive today, and Jesus posted this saying on the social media platform of his choice. And maybe you can talk amongst yourselves about what social media platform Jesus would be good at. But let's say he posts this on Twitter or something, or Facebook, and he gets comments. And imagine what the comments would look like. It would be something like, why can't we just talk to each other anymore? I blame Twitter. Or, God can be trusted with your anger, Jesus, but you can't. You sound really upset. Or, people abusing those without power like kids, and people who tell the truth about those abusing those without power, both sides have problems, and you're just proving my point. Or, instead of throwing them into the lake, how about you invite them over for dinner? Or, if we validate these little children as victims, they'll never accept their identity as a Christian. Or, it's not the little ones stumbling I'm concerned about. It's the antagonism that Jesus advocates for here. That's the real problem. Or, drowning millstones? This is what happens when you let yourself get caught up in worldly polemics and binaries. Or, how about just, pray for your enemies, Jesus. Or, look at how much fewer little ones are stumbling than used to be. Let's focus on the progress and be patient. Or, stumbling little children you're always going to have with you, Jesus, let's focus on the gospel. So, what's going on in these Facebook comments to Jesus? It's a type of moderate centrism that's more concerned about the reaction to injustice than the injustice itself. Instead of getting offended by people who would make children trip and stumble, it's getting offended at the people who get offended at the fact that there are children tripping and stumbling. So, the shift I want to talk about today is about both myself and what I hope is this church. And, that's the shift from centrism to solidarity.

From centrism to solidarity. So, let me tell you a story. When I first got to the table in March 2020, so, happy three-year anniversary, folks. When I first got here, it was not an LGBTQ-affirming church.

Although, I previously had thought it was. And, you could forgive me for making that mistake. When I was going through my interview process in 2019, there was a gay person on the elder board, another gay man served as a volunteer pastor and routinely preached and served communion. There was a thriving LGBTQ affinity group at that time. So, during my interview to be lead pastor, I mistakenly called the table church an affirming church. But, I was corrected. I was told, actually, we don't call ourselves affirming.

[4:17] Well, why not? So, the table had a long history of being in church where people of all sorts could belong. And, the original printed bulletin, back in the days when we had a printed bulletin, of the church said as much. It said, quote, gay or straight, Republican or Democrat, white or black, you are all welcome here. And, what this meant practically, was that particularly LGBTQ people did end up coming to the table. They were allowed to lead, to serve, even preach in this contemporary church environment that we've got here. While other churches in the city would have either just outrightly rejected them, accepted them for a while because they kept their view secret, and then eventually let them know that, no, you're not fully, you know, affirmed here. Or, you know, there are affirming churches in the city, but they provide a worship experience that doesn't necessarily fit someone's preferences. So, it meant that the table was home to folks who were friendly to gay people and theologically unaffirming. During my interview and since, I was told stories of people who came to the table church who had a non-affirming stance. If you don't know the term non-affirming, it just means, it means that you see, you know, same-sex activity or attraction as sinful, so they shouldn't get married. LGBTQ people shouldn't get married, they shouldn't have partners, etc. So, unaffirming people would come to the table church, and then they would build relationships with the LGBTQ people here, and they would change their views. And therefore, it was explained to me, that the table never became a clear LGBTQ affirming church, because it would prevent those types of unaffirming to affirming conversion stories from happening. So, from that interview forward, I knew that if I were to be offered the position of lead pastor, that stance would need to change. Now, there are a lot of terms for what the table church was trying to be. Centrism, being moderate, third way, purple church, meeting in the middle, finding common ground. And these are all ways of dealing with significant differences, and we're not talking about differences of like, you know, even policy on taxes, or like what your favorite movie or pizza topping is. These are significant differences around identity and rights, with the goals of building relationships, compromise, and maybe even finding a new way forward.

Purple churches, if you don't know the term, are churches that have significant populations of both Republican, red, and Democratic, blue voters. Red and blue makes purple, according to my kids who paint.

The third way churches attempt to split the difference between LGBTQIA believers and allies, and non-affirming believers by saying that both are welcome to serve, lead, and teach. And even multiracial or multicultural churches also trend towards a form of centrism, where no one race or culture is highlighted over another. There are also forms of centrism or being moderate on issues of like female leadership, things like soft complementarianism, or there's a book actually called Neither Complementarian Nor Egalitarian. On the goals of centrism, they sound virtuous. Who doesn't want less division, less fighting, less angst? However, centrism fails to take into account a significant factor in human relationships, and that's power. Power is the ability to exercise your will over others. And there are demographics in the United States that have more power and therefore more rights than others. A good way to tell who has power is by checking to see if your demographic has needed the Supreme Court to grant your right that others have always, they've already had. In my case, I have never needed the Supreme Court to tell me if I could vote, own land, receive an education, get married, have a bank account, not be owned by someone. Never needed the Supreme Court to tell me if I could be ordained, get a passport, drive a car, get a job without being discriminated against, receive equal pay as other people, or have access to health care.

Individuals in the communities they are a part of who have not had those rights will naturally have less power in society. And, and this can be a difficult thing for some folks to grasp, even if someone born today has all those rights, if people similar to them, the communities that they belong to in the years past have not had those rights, that affects the power that they have access to moving forward. The ownership or lack of power carries forward in time. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it, it is obvious that if a man entered at the starting line in a race 300 years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with their fellow runner.

This played out at the table church. In 2019, a gay couple went to the lead pastor at the time and asked the pastor to perform their marriage. And the pastor, who keep in mind had allowed for LGBTQ elders and preachers, told this couple no. He had seemingly out of nowhere decided to no longer perform weddings. And this of course sent sort of shivers down the spines of the queer folks that attended the table. This church, which was supposedly one of the few safe Christian churches and spaces in the city, had just denied a gay couple marriage. Listen, when centrism is made a goal, something very predictable happens. The needs of the person or the culture with more power will win out over the needs of those with less power. I don't know the mind of the pastor who denied this couple marriage.

[9 : 56] Maybe they were trying to future-proof their career in ministry but not crossing the line of gay marriage. Maybe they just really didn't like performing weddings. But the motives don't matter. The impact was a couple who had to find a different person, someone who was not the lead pastor of their church, to perform their wedding. The needs of a straight man won out over the needs of a gay couple.

And this pattern routinely prevails. Centrism often ends up being a way of withholding justice from a person or a community so that the needs of the culture with more power can be catered to.

The burden of centrism is borne the most heavily by those who have much to lose. I'll say that again. The burden of centrism is borne the most heavily by those who have the most to lose.

For instance, in my last church, it was said that a woman probably shouldn't be hired as a lead pastor because it would be a turnoff for potential male attendees. Maybe a woman could just be a disciple, pastor instead. Or a church shouldn't become fully affirming for fear of scaring off unaffirming straight folks. Let the gay people serve, but don't put them on the payroll. Affirmative action, it could be argued, is unfair to all those high-achieving white students. So we need to require testing so that admissions are fair. In every one of those cases, the injustices against the harm demographic or community are ignored. Only 9% of women are pastors, even though more than that go to seminary. LGBTQ people are victims of religious abuse. BIPOC students are discriminated against in school and workplaces. The feelings of straight white people, usually men, are the things that we need to pay attention to the most, it's argued. Centrism is a form of accommodation to supremacy. Hurting, pushing away, or offending the supremacy culture of whiteness, or straightness, or maleness, or able-bodied, or thin-bodied, or whatever. Offending the supremacy culture is seen as more egregious than the harms caused the culture identity that's been pushed to the margins.

Now why are we talking about this at church? Because Jesus was not a centrist. Jesus took sides, thank God. In Luke 6, we actually get a version of the Beatitudes that you find in the Sermon on the in Matthew 5. And Luke 6 version says this, Happy or blessed are you who are poor, because God's kingdom is yours. Blessed are you who hunger now, because you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh.

[12 : 30] But the part we may not be familiar with, that's not in Matthew's version, is that Jesus keeps going. He says this, How terrible, or woe to you who are rich, because you've already received your comfort.

How terrible for you who have plenty now, because someday you're going to be hungry. Now terrible for you who laugh now, because one day you will mourn. Jesus doesn't pull punches. He sides with the poor and the hungry and the mourning, and he does not take a moderating position.

Jesus invites us to love our enemies. Yes, that's true. But Jesus does not command us to not have enemies. In fact, it's important that we know how to name our enemies so that we know where God is and where justice is. In fact, Jesus made a lot of enemies because of who he loved and how he spoke to those with power in his day. One of my favorite ignored sayings of Jesus is in Luke chapter 6 verse 26. It continues his woe statements. He says, How terrible for you when everyone speaks well of you. In other words, if you're not offending someone, if you are not creating antagonisms between justice and injustice, if you're not creating enemies, that's not a good sign. Now, you could be thinking of examples where Jesus is having table fellowship with rich or powerful folks. But these are not examples of Jesus being a moderate, because in each case, he publicly shames those with more power and honor in his culture. In Luke chapter 7, Jesus is dining with Simon the Pharisee, and a woman known as a notorious sinner comes in and anoints Jesus' feet with oil and tears. Simon the Pharisee gets offended, and Jesus says this, Do you see this, woman?

When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing me since I came in.

You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. This is why I tell you her sins have been forgiven. She has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little, loves little.

[14 : 35] Jesus doesn't sit at the table of powerful and religious people so that he can try to bring them together, like some miraculous Coke commercial. He does it to publicly shame them.

Something that the Methodist Wesleyan movement, as well as the Roman Catholics, have gotten right for a long time is what's called the preferential option for the poor. And it's this observation that Latin Jesuits and bishops made that scripture always trends towards favoring, favoring the marginalized, the poor, the pushed out. It's actually baked into Catholic canon law, and this is a quote, Christians are obliged to promote social justice, that evil word, social justice, to assist the poor from their own resources. So if anybody accuses you of like being a woke Gen Z social justice warrior, you can just point them to the churches like centuries old teaching on social justice. Sweet Jesus.

The preferential option was not only for the materially poor, but also includes all those who are marginalized in society, including children, the disabled, the elderly, the terminally ill, and victims of injustice and oppression. I think there's this misconception that the Bible is against preferential treatment or favoritism. But this cannot be further from the truth.

Favoritism is baked into the message of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus's ministry, and the ministry of the early church. We are meant to, supposed to, favor those with less power, less access to resources, and less social status. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul gives us this metaphor of the church as a body. And he begins by emphasizing unity. He says, we're all baptized into one spirit, one body, whether Jew or Greek or slave or free, we're all given one spirit to drink from. But later, Paul makes a different point. In a series of statements that would probably make most middle schoolers giggle, and probably some adults too, he uses the example of how we treat our private parts with more dignity than, say, our eyes or our nose. You would be shamed, or you would lose honor in Paul's culture to show off your private parts. And this is basically generally true today.

So listen to this. This is 1 Corinthians 12, starting in verse 22. Paul says, in fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary.

[16 : 58] And the parts we regard as less honorable are those that we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the supposedly more honorable parts do not require the special care. So God has put the body, the church together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it.

And if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. There's that preferential treatment again. What Paul was talking about for the Corinthian church is that tension between the rich and the poor. It's a major theme of the letter. The rich people in society already have honor and dignity, and poor people don't. They're better off not seen, not heard. So, Paul says, in the church, we need to treat the poor with more dignity, more honor, and more respect. Why? Paul says, for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. That's not being a centrist. That's not being moderate. It's choosing a side of righting wrongs, of recalibrating the scales of justice towards those who have been pushed to the margins. So, what does that mean for us, for the table church? Overall, in my three years here, it has meant an emphasis on clarity. It definitely affects our preaching. I don't believe in vague preaching on important subjects. It would be better not to say anything at all. I'd rather preach in such a way that those who have been pushed to the margins know, are certain that God is on their side, even at the risk of offending those who have already been told that God is on their side all their life. Listen, friends, I mean this in love, which is a cliché, but I believe it. The table church is not a church for everyone. A church for everyone can't actually exist. And I just think we need to be honest about it. Centrism will always put the burden on those who have the most to lose. If I'm given the choice between creating a church for someone who's unsure about LGBTQ rights and a church created for a queer person needing spiritual community, I'm going to choose the queer person needing spiritual community. There are already lots of churches where straight folks can work out their affirming theology without fear of being kicked out or being publicly shamed. There are not nearly enough of those churches for queer folks. The unaffirming straight person is never at risk of someone questioning their right to exist, get married, or be in love. But the LGBTQ person constantly is. So we're going to be a church for queer folks.

If I am given a choice between a person who is uncertain about the existence of systemic racism or white supremacy and a black, brown, Asian, Jewish, indigenous person who has actually experienced those forces, I'm going to choose a church for BIPOC people. There are already lots of churches where folks can work out their thoughts and feelings on racism without fear of being ostracized. And there aren't nearly enough churches for people of color to be their complete selves. So let's be that kind of church. If this sounds antagonistic or like a line drawn in the sand to you, you're right. There was an earlier version of this sermon that I wrote that had a lot more caveats and exceptions and footnotes and addendums, and I realized I was falling prey to the very thing that I was preaching against. I was trying to preach in a way that made moderates feel comfortable. I was footnoting my way back to centrism. But for the person of color being discriminated against, the trans person having their life legislated out of existence, the woman who's losing rights to her pay or her body, the poor person who has nowhere to sleep tonight, they're not asking for centrism. They're not asking for a moderate approach.

They're asking for solidarity. And in following the footsteps of Jesus, I want to give it to them. And I hope you do too.