

“Peter Objects: A Reflection on the Cross of Christ and Contemporary Baptist Politics”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Mark 8:31-38
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on February 25, 2018

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." Mark 8:31-38

The full title of this sermon was too long to fit in your worship guide: “Peter Objects: A Reflection on the Cross of Christ and Contemporary Baptist Politics,” which may seem like an odd pairing, but I think it’s worth our exploration. I keep wondering whether we ought to delve into Baptist politics together when I know many of you don’t come from Baptist traditions and you’re at Lake Shore because it’s Lake Shore and not so much because we’re Baptist. Some of you are very Baptist and come from deep Baptist roots. Either way, I think it’s important to know our own story. To begin, a little recent history:

On November 30, 2016, Lake Shore voted 84% in favor to add the following statement to our church bylaws: “Lake Shore Baptist Church is a welcoming and affirming community of Christians attempting to discover, articulate, and embody the meaning of the Gospel in the world today. We affirm each individual as a child of God and as created in God's image. Our welcome holds no bounds; we welcome all persons into membership and full participation in the life and ministry of our congregation.” The intent of the statement was to welcome the LGBTQ community while also leaving the welcome open-ended so as to be inclusive of additional ostracized peoples in the future.

That same month, along with First Baptist Church Austin and Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, our congregation was voted out of the Baptist General Convention of Texas due to our support of same-sex couples. This decision most directly impacted our Truett Seminary students and Baylor ministry students at Lake Shore who receive BGCT scholarships. Chris Williamson and Jacob Brenton were both in danger of losing anywhere from \$150 to \$564 per academic hour, depending on how the cards fell. Both Truett students bravely remained members of our congregation despite the financial threat.

Natalie Webb and I then encouraged the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to develop a scholarship fund that could replace the lost funds for students whose congregations had been kicked out of the BGCT. Through the generous contributions of the Baugh Foundation and other donors, CBF created a scholarship fund. Lake Shore also set up our own scholarship fund so that we could personally provide students with \$1000 scholarships for each academic year that would be matched through Baylor's matching program. I prodded Truett Seminary as well, who eventually helped maneuver funds on behalf of students and through these combined efforts, we managed to support our students with no financial loss to them. The struggle to support our students, however, did not end there.

As part of their seminary education, Truett students are required to spend a semester of "mentoring" in a ministry setting, but in August of 2017, Truett Seminary determined that Truett students could no longer complete their mentoring hours in a congregation like Lake Shore—at least, not unless they were willing to forfeit their scholarship for the semester they were here. It was an odd decision given that Truett students have a history of mentoring in all sorts of ecumenical settings outside the Baptist tradition with no effect on their scholarships.

In November of 2017, our congregation was also voted out of the Waco Baptist Regional Association—again, because of our decision to affirm gay people. This fall the seminary also determined that Lake Shore members may no longer serve as Covenant group leaders. Covenant groups are the small groups that all Truett students participate in for spiritual growth and formation. Truett often hires Truett graduates to lead these groups. Zach and Claire Helton have both served Truett in this capacity in the past, but as I understand it, they would no longer be welcome. Last week, a student told me the dean was worried that inviting a minister from Lake Shore to speak at their off campus event would be too controversial.

When Peter pulled Jesus aside to rebuke him, I find myself wondering a lot about the content of that rebuke. Jesus had just warned the disciples that he was going to be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and I wonder if Peter was concerned that Jesus was getting a bit too controversial.

I think it's time we take a look at this word: controversial. Believe it or not, I spent most of my life being conflict-avoidant. The adjectives people used to describe me were: quiet, sweet, timid, and shy. Mostly they called me sweet.

But eventually I woke up. They didn't call Jesus sweet. They nailed that man to a cross.

Maybe when Peter rebuked Jesus, he told Jesus to tone it down. "What good will your ministry be, Jesus, if they kill you?" Maybe Peter made a plea for unity. Couldn't Jesus find a way to work *with* the elders and chief priests? It would be more Christ-like to work for peace than to get yourself killed. Didn't Jesus know that?

To Peter's credit, whatever he said, I think his motivation was love. Peter loved Jesus. He didn't want to see him get hurt. He didn't want to see someone like Jesus thrown to the curb by the religious establishment when he was doing so much good in the world. Peter wasn't just concerned about PR and ensuring good press. He wanted to protect Jesus and protect the disciples. He likely wanted to save their lives.

But Jesus says Peter's love is misguided. Actually, when Jesus says it, it comes out a whole lot stronger than "misguided." Jesus calls Peter's thinking downright satanic, which is not exactly the response you're hoping for when you talk to Jesus.

In my lifetime, I've never seen the country so polarized. I'm never seen the church so divided. This is worrisome to me and uncomfortable. I don't like it. I don't like it that my own seminary that shaped me as a Christian and a theologian and championed me as a student and preacher would actively disown me and my congregation for one difference in Scriptural interpretation. The division hurts me.

The question grows more crucial every day: how do we speak and how do we live in such a polarized and polarizing context? Avoiding conflict is no longer an option. Literally, you can't escape it. Conflict is at your back door; heck, it's charging through your front door. It is in your house. So what now?

What if our well-meaning attempts at conversation increase the polarization?

What if our silence makes us complicit in the systems of injustice?

It has become increasingly important in the Trump era for Christians to learn how to handle division and conflict. Before he was elected, I believed that, for the most part, even though I disagreed with some Christians about how to vote, we still shared many common values but we differed on how to prioritize them and implement them into policy. But the project to find common ground seems to be slipping away. In the denominational context, I've worked hard to relate to people based on our common ground, but I've now been banned from the conversation more times than I can count. You can't discuss common ground if you don't have a place at the table.

The more times I get kicked out of the conversation, the bolder and braver my speech gets because if being polite doesn't do the trick, why hold back? But when we speak boldly and bravely, do we contribute to the contention, hostility, and polarization that plagues our country? Are we speaking truth to power or are we adding fuel to the fire?

Should we heed Peter's rebuke and strive to be less contentious?

Pastors Sally Sarratt and Maria Swearingen, responding to CBF's recent attempt to find a "middle way" in the conversation about LGBTQ inclusion, said this:

First, while all people may be equal, all opinions are not equal, nor should they be given an equal place at the table. This is a morally debilitating myth we keep telling each other to pacify conflicts and coddle our fears over disagreement and loss. Jesus did not think all opinions were equal. Jesus' witness and example demonstrates that the opinions, better yet the lives, of the dispossessed were worthy of more time and attention than calculating mathematically equal air-time for everyone. The fact that we think decision-making in light of the gospel of liberation should look like "equally valid opinions getting equal time" is not only absurd, it is a striking example of the "banality of evil," as Hannah Arendt describes it.ⁱ

During Lent we must face the fact that if Jesus had been nicer, he probably wouldn't have been killed. If Jesus hadn't challenged the religious establishment by dining with sinners and welcoming lepers and breaking the Sabbath in order to heal people, Jesus probably wouldn't have been killed. If Jesus hadn't put people before policy, he probably wouldn't have been killed.

Our moral vision can be clear, consistent, and kind. It is not unkind to tell the truth. It is not disrespectful to disagree with those in power. It is not unloving to confront. It is not wrong to take a side. Jesus was always siding with the poor and the oppressed, and in the name of Christianity, may we dare to do the same, regardless of the cost.

Because what is the point, Jesus said, if you gain the whole world but lose your life? Obviously he wasn't concerned about dying. Jesus wasn't talking about losing your literal life. He meant don't lose your reason for living. Don't lose your soul, your integrity, your purpose. If you lose those, it doesn't matter what else you manage to keep intact. If you try to save yourself, you'll lose. If your purpose is bigger than you, you gain.

So let us be kind. But let us be clear. Let us be consistent. For example, at Lake Shore Baptist Church, we stand against sexual sin. I believe the sexual sin of our time is assault. I believe we can see with piercing clarity that the church has failed its victims, that congregations are willing to protect and even applaud perpetrators, to blame and shame victims, and to contribute theologically to the culture of sexism that makes sexual violence tolerable. We see and name prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community as a ploy of the devil to distract us from attending to the real sexual crime that is happening daily in our churches, communities, and families. We name the sustained exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community an affront to God and an affront to the Gospel. This is not a mere *subject* of disagreement in the church. These are *people* the church has wounded, and as the church, we call ourselves to repentance. Nothing short of repentance will suffice.

Studies show that LGBTQ young adults who mature in religious contexts have higher odds of suicidal thoughts, especially chronic suicidal thoughts, and higher odds of suicide attempts compared to LGBTQ young adults who do not grown up in church.ⁱⁱ

I'm going to state the obvious: Church shouldn't make you want to kill yourself.

In a contentious atmosphere like the one we are all living in, it is more important than ever that our moral vision be *clear*. But if you are clear, be prepared: they will call you controversial. If you stand up for the oppressed, you will be labeled a radical. They might despise you the way they despised Jesus. They will say you are contributing to divisiveness. Many Peters will offer you their objections.

But do not lose heart. You may lose the world, but you have gained your soul.

Lake Shore Baptist Church, I could not be more proud, more honored, and more humbled to belong to a community of Christians, who, in an age marked by hatred, prejudice, and divisiveness stand in solidarity with the oppressed, the ostracized, and the suffering. I know that we still have a lot to learn, that we are still undoing the poison of our privilege and healing from our blindness. I know that we make mistakes, that we are still wrestling with the big questions and wrestling with God. But somehow, in the midst of our all fumbling attempts at love, we have chosen not to avoid conflict but to wade into controversy bearing the name of Christ, holding high the banner of love, integrity intact, conviction intact, speaking truth with grace, delivering the message of Christ's compassion clearly, consistently, and kindly.

The next time Peter tries to tell you to calm down, you look him in the eye. You say, "Satan, where is Peter and what did you do with him? He is usually the first one to jump into the middle of things, so I don't recognize this conflict avoidant scared-y cat. What happened to Peter, the Rock?"

And regardless of whether Peter comes to his senses, then turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the glimmering things of this earth shall grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Follow him. Follow him. Follow him. Even if, even when, it takes you to the cross. Amen.

ⁱ Maria Swearingen and Sally Sarratt, "Pastoral Letter in Response to CBF Hiring Policy," February 10, 2018, <http://calvarydc.org/pastoral-letter-2/>

ⁱⁱ Jeremy J. Gibbs, "Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults" Archives of Suicide Research, 2015 Oct-Dec; 19(4): 472-488, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4706071/>