

Hospitality As A Political Act | Joelle Wight

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hospitality, political conversations, faithful disagreement, prophetic imagination, political engagement, discipleship, Jesus' politics, political action, consciousness raising

SPEAKERS

Joelle Wight

Blake Smith 00:28

Hey, Project Zion Podcast listeners. This is Blake Smith, and I want to welcome you to this extra shot episode. Recently, the Council of Presidents of Seventy led a two-day session on hospitality in the Central Mission Center. The Council has been gracious enough to allow us to air these presentations for you our listeners. This episode is titled Hospitality and Politics, and was led by President of Seventy, Joelle Wight.

Joelle Wight 00:49

Welcome everybody. This evening, we are going to be talking about hospitality as a political act. And I have to be honest with you, when I decided to do this topic, I was really passionate about it, because I think that we have to learn, as people of faith, how to have political conversations in productive ways. But it's also really hard for us to do, and it takes a lot of practice. So tonight, no matter where you are on the political spectrum, no matter the questions you have or the concerns you have, know that there is grace in this space for you, and we'll figure it out altogether. Alright? So, we are going to begin. Let me give you an overview. We are going to begin with studying our intention before we move on to politics and hospitality, after which, we will talk about why we as disciples, should be political at all. Then we'll look at Jesus's politics and how he would have approached political action. Then we will look at how he did approach political action, before moving on to how we can live hospitality into politics and finally, time permitting, we will end with a meditation on our Enduring Principles. So before we get into what you see on your screen now, I want us to set our intention. And what I mean by that is this, a lot of times we move very quickly through our days. We track tasks off as quickly as we can, but we don't always think about what we're approaching them with or the attitude that we want to have while we're engaging in them, and so I want us to take just a minute to close our eyes and internally set your intention for what you want to get out of this session and how you want to approach this session. We all may fall short of the intentions that we set, but that doesn't mean that we don't give it our best try. So with that, let us begin. I think a good place to start when we talk about politics in relation to hospitality, specifically for Community of Christ, is to look at how we disagree in Community of Christ, I used to work with Latter-day Seekers, who are people who have left the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. And for them, our whole concept of disagreement is completely foreign. But what I always tell them is that we are. We are literally a tradition born of dissenters. We are the ones that said, Nope, we're not going to do it that way. We're staying put. You all can go do whatever you want. So it is literally in our blood to disagree. Because of that, though, as we try to live in intentional community,

we've had to navigate what it looks like to disagree while still remaining together, still being in community, and so we have a couple of tools that can help us and that I hope we will apply tonight. The first, which I'm sure you've heard of, is Faithful Disagreement. My biggest pet peeve about this tool, however, is that we hear about it a lot. We say, Oh, I'm just going to be in faithful disagreement with you, but we have no idea what we mean when we say that it's a good thing that we can throw around when it when it suits us, but we don't often take a look at what we're actually agreeing to when we engage in faithful disagreement. It doesn't mean that if you disagree, you just get to sit there and stew, or that if you do agree with whatever is being said, that you just get to sit on your high horse because you're so right. It does mean, regardless of your stance on this issue, you have a place in this faith community. You agreeing or disagreeing with this particular stance taken by Community of Christ does not affect your worth or make you less wanted in this community, your views, one way or another, are not a test of faith, and you are respected as a human being first and foremost. It also means that we are navigating whatever issue we are talking about in community with an awareness and an openness to the Spirit and the way that it will form and guide us. So that means we can't just dig our feet in and remain stubborn. We have to be open to the possibility that our views might change. We also, because we are considering topics in community, should be open to hearing the stories shared in that community and letting those stories shape our hearts and then eventually our minds. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must stop focusing on being right and start focusing on being in right relationship with God, with each other and with all of creation. So the first tool that we are going to use is our principle of Faithful Disagreement. The second tool is Prophetic Imagination. Prophetic Imagination is this beautiful concept, and I believe it was first coined by a theologian named Walter Brueggemann, but I have heard many people say it in Community of Christ spaces, we really like to engage with this idea of Prophetic Imagination. And it's this idea that beyond anything that we can imagine, God can imagine bigger. God can imagine greater. God can imagine more peaceful, more possible than we could ever comprehend. And so Prophetic Imagination is our choice to engage with God in God's prophetic imagination, what's possible in a way that we couldn't on our own. If something is said this evening that goes against your typical political beliefs, I would invite you to put your disbelief aside during this session and instead ask yourself, but what if it's true? What are the implications for my life as a disciple if I agreed with this specific political stance? And I want to calm your fears now I'm not making bold political stances in this session. I'm talking more generally about what Jesus would do and how Jesus would approach politics. So, I don't want to concern anybody that I'm going to tell you who to vote for, anything like that. But if something is said that goes against your typical political stance, I would invite you to engage in prophetic imagination. We as a prophetic people are all invited to join God in God's prophetic imaginings, in hopes that we can work together to bring about God's preferred future, regardless of where you stand on an issue. God's prophetic imagination can help us step aside outside of politically fraught views of the issues that we are facing, and it can help us come with creative solutions to these issues that uphold the worth and dignity of all people and honor the Sacredness of Creation. The final tool that we're going to use tonight is turning to wonder. I recently heard a story on NPR, and I can't remember exactly what it was about, and I don't remember when I heard it, so I can't tell you where to go find it, but essentially, what it was saying is that people who are able to kind of function better in relationships or have stronger relationships, are willing to do one simple thing, and that is when they reach a point in a conversation where most people would throw up their hands and get angry and walk away, they are willing to ask one more question, and that makes all the difference. And so tonight, if you feel like getting up and throwing up your hands and walking away or logging off, I would encourage

you to ask one more question, turn to wonder and see where it leads. Alright, John is really great, because he moves the mouse back for me, that's amazing. All right, so now we're going to move into politics and hospitality. These things don't necessarily obviously connect, but I hope by the end of this evening, I've convinced you that they do directly connect. It's been said that a vote is a kind of prayer about the world that we want to live in. If we hope to live in a world with more hospitality, then we have to vote and participate civically as part of our discipleship. The politics of our communities, our nation and the world, directly shape the systems that structure our daily lives. Therefore, they directly determine how and where and when a person is welcome. I'm going to try really hard tonight to not just speak in abstractions. I think when we talk about political things, it's easy to talk up here. It's harder to live and act in the concrete world. I want us to recognize the ways that the concrete stuff impacts us. So we're going to brainstorm for just a minute together some of the ways throughout history that specific policies have limited hospitality. Whatever your example is, try to make it one that impacts you in some way. So I'm going to give some examples. For example, prior to 1920 as a woman in this country, I was not allowed to vote. So that was a specific policy stance that still, if it was still in place today, I would not be welcome to vote, so my hospitality towards me would be limited. So we're going to take just a minute if you need, do you want one more example, or do you want to start thinking of your own? Okay, I'll do another one. Okay, perhaps someone, and I can't see everybody joining online, but perhaps someone in your family line was enslaved, which was a practice that was protected by law until the Emancipation Proclamation. So, hospitality was denied to people of color until the Emancipation Proclamation opened up doors for them. So, I want you to think for just a minute of an example of any kind of policy that would affect you and limit the hospitality extended towards you.

Speaker 1 11:26

Constitution or the Supreme Court ruled separate but equal.

Joelle Wight 11:31

Yes, exactly.

Speaker 1 11:33

And when I was growing up in the South, that wasn't equal, wasn't equal, schools wasn't equal, water fountains or restrooms, or you can name it, whatever they you know, busses,

Joelle Wight 11:46

Mm, hmm, amen yeah, so separate but equal limited hospitality. Sometimes it's difficult for us to recognize the ways that policies and practices of our governing bodies directly impact our daily lives. In fact, in political advocacy work, one of the first things that is taught explores consciousness raising, and I want to just touch on it briefly, consciousness raising helps people to begin to recognize the personal as political. So what I mean by this is that we help people understand how the struggles of their daily lives are likely connected to bigger picture issues and policies. Consciousness raising shows that individual issues are not just isolated personal problems, but reflect broader systems of inequality and oppression. So this time, I'm not going to make you come up with the examples, because I had chat GPT AI help me come up with some examples. So first, a person struggling with mental health issues like depression or anxiety might feel isolated believing that their condition is a personal failure or weakness. However, access to mental health care is often determined by socio economic status, health

insurance coverage and government funding for healthcare services. The stigma around mental health is shaped by societal views and political decisions influence the availability of mental health resources. So yes, an individual can experience anxiety and depression, but a lot of times, their ability to access care or to work through that condition is connected to a much larger system that they have no control over. Another example is a family struggling to avoid to afford groceries. May see their situation as a personal financial issue. However, food insecurity is often a result of larger political issues such as income inequality, welfare policies, minimum wage laws and access to affordable housing, the distribution of resources and access to nutritious food is shaped by government policies and economic systems making food insecurity a political issue as much as a personal one. So yes, an individual family might struggle to have enough money to afford food, but there are all kinds of other issues that help contribute to that situation, like the Farm Bill, like the Farm Bill. So in addition to realizing through consciousness raising that issues we face personally have political implications, it also helps us realize that, huh, I'm not the only one experiencing this issue. Laura might be experiencing this issue as well, and so consciousness raising helps us make those connections, person to person, where we realize that in their welfare resides my welfare, and in my welfare resides their welfare. So it's creating these systems of connection and support politics relate directly to creating hospitality, because we can leverage political action and engagement to create welcome where it doesn't currently exist. So now we move on to the question of why disciples should engage politically, since we have established the ways politics and hospitality are laying. Eight. The next thing we must explore is the reasons why we as disciples should even engage politically, why we should care about it. In his book, "Faith Seeking Understanding", by Daniel Migliore explores the mission of the Big C church. So not just Community of Christ, not just the Catholics, not just the Methodists, but the big C Church that Jesus established. And when he talks about how you know that a church, any any individual congregation, is engaged in mission, one of the things that he says is that you can tell, because the Holy Spirit is allowed into all fields of human endeavor, in those situations. What he means is that we don't just limit it to when we walk in the church doors and then walk out. We let the Holy Spirit infuse every action we take and every choice we make, including in our in our politics. What Migliore is saying here is that if we truly respond to Christ's mission. We won't compartmentalize our lives making a box for faith and a box for politics. Instead, we allow our beliefs to infuse and inspire our political engagement. Disciples are called to be about this work of bringing about God's preferred future in the world. In a book, I'm not going to just quote books to you all night, I promise. But in a book that I would encourage you all to read, and I'll tell you the title in a minute, Donal Kraybill calls this preferred future God's upside down kingdom, because it takes much of our current societal, economic and social structures or political structures, and flips it on their heads. The book is called "The Upside Down Kingdom" by Donald Kraybill, and it literally changed my life. It's profound when we find ourselves trying to avoid allowing our politics and beliefs to interact. We are likely doing it for two reasons, and Kraybill kind of gets into these. The first reason is because we are trying to keep the peace. We want to walk into our congregations and have nice, smiling conversations with people and sharing hugs, and that is important. But we aren't really keeping the peace when we don't talk about politics in our congregations. Instead, we are supporting what Jesus would refer to as Pax Romana. So when the empire that Jesus lived in the Romans, said, you continue to let us rule because we bring you peace Pax Romana, but they weren't really bringing people peace. They were bringing false peace through violence and dehumanization and subjugation. And Jesus said, I won't just allow these systems and structures to continue, because I know that that is not true peace. The second reason, and maybe the more challenging reason, that we try to avoid

talking about politics in our religious spaces is because sometimes when our beliefs and the Enduring Principles that we profess meet the political stances that we hold there is cognitive dissonance. They don't agree with each other, and we don't know what to do with that, and so we just avoid ever letting them meet. It's like oil and water. We don't want them to touch. But again, if we are going to profess these beliefs, we have to make sure that they don't just stay within the walls of our church buildings. Ultimately, if we are to have any integrity at all, we as disciples have to live the beliefs we profess in our sacred spaces, in our daily lives, and, by extension, in political spaces. So Jesus's politics are the next thing that we are going to dive into. And this is a really hard thing to talk about, because I've seen so many bumper stickers and so many political signs that say that Jesus would vote for a certain candidate. That is not what I'm going to tell you tonight, but I am going to talk about the approach that Jesus took to the politics of his day, because we as disciples are followers of Jesus, I think it's important here to talk for just a minute about what Jesus's politics are and how Jesus engaged politically in his time. Let me begin by saying that Jesus is inherently political, the very way he interacted in the world, the very message that he came to bring challenges the status quo and calls for a reordering of the policies and structures that we allow to govern us. So if anyone tells you that Jesus wasn't political, they aren't examining the Gospels closely enough, because he was. It's what got him killed. Amen, you couldn't hear that on Zoom. It's what got him killed. He was calling for such a radical change that people just couldn't even fathom it. Just because Jesus is inherently political, that does not mean that he would align himself with any political party or movement today, though, he would likely be more supportive of some practices and policies than he would be of others. So what then exactly are Jesus's politics first, Jesus's politics are always, always, always on behalf of the marginalized or oppressed. That is literally never not the case. In every situation, we have to ask ourselves, who has the most to lose and the least protective factors at their disposal? And then we go and stand with them. We vote with them. We speak on with them, not on their behalf. We speak with them. Jesus's politics were never about forcing others to conform to specific sets of beliefs or practices. He would not condone a theocratic approach that required all people to live under the beliefs of any one group, because the Bible says so. In fact, Jesus spent a lot of time directly refuting the claim that something should be a certain way, because the Pharisees said so. The Pharisees, there was no Bible in his day, so the Pharisees were the religious authority in that time. And he said, I don't hear what they say, this is the kingdom of God. Finally, Jesus's politics were without allegiance to anything but God. He stood in the midst of the radicals of his day and the traditionalists of his day, and he continued to point to God's preferred future without picking sides. You so now we are going to look at how Jesus engaged politically. Following Jesus's example as disciples also extends to the ways that we engage politically. This means that in every political action we take or choice we make, we make sure to uphold the worth and dignity of all creation. We can't resort to nasty and demeaning back and forth arguments like those that so often fill our Facebook feeds. I think I have enough time, so I'm going to tell you a brief story. When I was a social work student, I did my practicum with an organization called jobs with justice, and Jobs with Justice would bring together all different parties, some of them religious, some of them not, most of them union related, and they would advocate for workers rights. And I really appreciated the community organizing did, and they did, and the ultimate goal of their work that there was one thing that is a follower of Jesus really bothered me, and that was whoever they were against on an issue was less than human to them. There was no way of moving forward together. There was only a way of winning some grounds for our side. So, for example, one of their most famous and luckily, the Missouri chapter, did not do this while I was apart the shock. The Chicago chapter is well known

through history for doing this. One of their famous ways of protesting unjust employment is that they would create a giant mouse trap, and they would put it over the employee entrance so that all of the executives who were rats to them would have to cross underneath it. And yeah, it was probably effective for the specific change that they were trying to make in the moment, but in the long term, it kept them as adversaries, rather than as people in community working together. So Jesus would not have put a rat trap over anybody's door. He would have made sure to uphold the worth of all people and the sacredness of creation. Jesus was always creative enough to find a third way that was neither fight nor flight, but was instead about the careful and arduous pursuit of a love big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free. We too must be that creative. We will talk more about this in just a moment, but I want to just briefly share about an organization called the Friends Committee on national legislation. And I'm guessing some of you are familiar with it. Yes, they are a lobbying organization that helps people learn how to engage with their representatives, their starting place, and the value that they revisit before any political action is that there is something of God in everyone. And you always have to remember that before you go into a meeting with a representative, before you go and participate in any kind of protest, there is something of God in everyone. Obviously, this is true of the people for whom they are advocating, but it is also true for their opposition, those leaders with whom they adamantly disagree. Holding on to this troop is incredibly important as we engage politically. So what does it actually look like to live hospitably in politics? I said at the beginning that I really wanted to try and make things concrete and actionable. Up to this point, you are maybe thinking that I failed at that, and that's okay, so I want to take just a few moments to talk so this about some specific things so that we can practice hospitality as a political act. So we begin on a personal level. If we are practicing hospitality as a political act within ourselves, we must begin by checking in and reflecting about all of the political decisions we make. I'm not just talking about who you vote for. I'm talking about all of the political things that you support. But especially as election season approaches, we must make sure that the only party platform we are promoting is that of the kingdom of God. We find ourselves defending something simply because of our party affiliations. We must pause and instead, instead examine the issue through the lens of God's brain. Next, we move to the politics that arise in our interactions with one or two other people, this perhaps is where our hospitality is most needed. It's often in those small conversations with those we encounter that we frequently find the most opportunities for hospitality, both in how we treat them and in how our conversation shapes action. We must begin simply by listening, not with the intent to respond, but instead with the intent to understand. Next, we stay curious, turning to wonder, choosing to ask just one more question, when we would rather just stop the conversation and walk away. Finally, we must resist the urge to default or hold to the party line, whatever our party affiliation is. Remember, as disciples, we must root ourselves in something much deeper than party politics. Third, we look at what it might look like to practice hospitality as a political act in our congregations, which are uniquely equipped for organizing, often we shy away from preaching about politics behind the pulpit, and I agree we do need to be careful about how we do this. But again, Jesus was inherently political, and so if we can't preach about politics, then we can't preach about the gospel. And I don't know what I'm supposed to talk about on Sunday. If we can't do that, this does not mean that we stand up and endorse a certain candidate, in fact, that would lose us our tax exempt status. So don't do it. It does mean that we bring our shared values and principles to provide insight and guidance on the problems we face in the political sphere. I know that there are some folks who have concerns about the tax implications of participating politically as a congregation. Don't worry, there are many religious groups who have been doing this a lot longer than we have. As long as we

aren't specifically endorsing a candidate, we are allowed to engage politically. In fact, we have a built in group of people with whom we can engage perhaps you're still a bit concerned about bringing politics into your congregation. There are still things that you can do to help your congregation approach politics with hospitality in mind. There's a website called All Things Are Spiritual, and if you're interested in looking at it, you can find it just on your phone. All Things Are Spiritual, or you can just make a note and check it out later. But you can access on this website some spiritual practices intended for both before and after the election. So on, All t\Things Are Spiritual. There's a tab that says spirituality and democracy, and there are all kinds of resources, including these spiritual practices. And this was something that was created prior to the last election that still has relevance today. There these are not partisan in any way. They don't endorse any party or any candidate, but they instead invite all people to approach politics from a place of faith. So I would encourage you to check that out. It might be a good entry point for your congregation. Finally, we look at the specific actions we can take in the formal structures of our local and national governments. The first thing that we should do in regard to this is to join with others who are already doing the work. Over the past five years, I have encountered so many people of faith who are committed to living out their beliefs through political action. They have a wealth of knowledge from which we can learn. Because, honestly, we're kind of babies in this work. We've only just started engaging politically as a faith community. For example, the National Council of Churches, which some of you might have heard about, they're the ones that produce the NRSV UE version of the Bible. They have a an annual ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, DC, and here you can meet and network with other people from faith based organizations and take specific action on issues of justice and peace. Another organization that isn't partisan that we can join with is the Poor People's Campaign. This summer, a group of Community of Christ folks from Chesapeake Bay Mission Center, attended the moral March and assembly hosted by the Poor People's Campaign. We brought signs with the Enduring Principles listed on them, and listened as people shared their stories and called for collective action on behalf of the poor. The list of groups already doing this work is long. We simply. Have to take the next steps to join them. Next we can individually and collectively lobby our elected officials. It is so important that they hear from us. And you don't have to travel to Washington, DC to talk with them, although if you do, you want to stay with me, I'll help you get to the Capitol. Organizations like the Friends Committee on national legislation have chapters nationwide. So the Friends Committee on national legislation is a Quaker lobbying organization, and I believe that they are the oldest religious lobbying body in the country, but they have common consent down to a science, and they really know how to work together to come to consensus. So FCNL is this Quaker organizing group, and some of you might know a man by the name of Steven Donoho. He's an employee of FCNL, but he's a member of Community of Christ, and that's why we have such a strong connection to that organization. In fact, there is an FCNL chapter here in independence that a lot of church members are a part of. They make visits to their representatives on a regular basis. A lot of times they don't even have to physically travel there. I've seen my dad multiple times stop on Zoom calls to join those meetings. Lobbying a representative can be intimidating, but it's so important, and if you want more information about how you might do this, start by visiting the FCNL website. They are excellent teachers about how to lobby. They really are. Finally and perhaps most importantly, you can vote not along party lines, but along gospel lines. I want to introduce you to a spiritual practice that you can try later on your own, pick an issue that you are struggling with, or one that you know is contentious in your community. If you think that you already have your mind made up on whatever this issue is, I would invite you to set that certainty aside and approach it with new eyes. I would invite you to find a comfortable space where you

can do this without distraction. You can use this time to think about and explore this topic through each of the Enduring Principles, and as you do so for each principle, you would ask yourselves, how can I live out this Enduring Principle in response to this issue? And second, how does this Enduring Principle inform my stance on this issue? If you need some additional background and Enduring Principles, the link has Sharing in Community of Christ, If you come to an Enduring Principle that you like really don't think connects to the issue you picked. I would invite you to just set it aside and then come back to it, because you might be really surprised at the ways that you find that it does relate. And then, after you've explored your issue through each of the enduring principles, not completely skipping either one, there are questions that I would invite you to answer the first is, with the guidance of the Enduring Principles on this issue, the most hospitable choice I can make regarding this issue is so you'd answer that. And then the second question is, what action can I take now, tomorrow or in the next week, to advocate for that approach in political Life. Thank you.