

Matthew 5-7

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Faith, Not Fear

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / October 10th, 2021

(S1) Did you know that deep in the recesses of our brain is a grape-sized cluster of cells called the amygdala? Our amygdala is a little like the emergency response center of our brain. It is constantly searching for danger, and when it identifies it, it sounds the alarm. Our blood pressure rises, our heartbeat goes up, we go on high alert and get ready for action. The amygdala “activates the fight-or-flight response.”¹

Turn a corner and find a snarling dog; your amygdala will send you sprinting in the other direction, or you might start throwing rocks, fight, or flight. That’s good! Your amygdala can save your life. Some people call our amygdala our lizard brain.² When threatened, we become as speedy as lizards and as thoughtful as lizards, not very smart. The amygdala wants to get you away from the threat, not think through all your best options. Sometimes politics activates our amygdala, which makes us afraid.

During the 2016 Presidential Primary, about 50% of each political party said the other political party made them feel afraid.³ Politicians on both sides of the aisle use our lizard brains against us. **(S2)** One 2016 primary candidate on the right said, “It was only a matter of time before the federal government started using chisels to ‘remove the crosses and the Stars of David from the tombstones of our fallen soldiers.’”⁴ On the left, it was so bad it was funny. **(S3)** In a 2011 ad, a man dressed in a suit pushed his grandmother up a hill. *America the Beautiful* played as the video says Republicans want to abolish Medicare. **(S4)** And then, at the end, the man dumps his grandma, a manikin, off the side of a cliff.⁵ Both parties use immigration, abortion, taxes, healthcare, gun laws, gay rights, and more to stroke our lizard brains. Fear is the “elephant” in the room (or should I say “donkey”?). So here’s my question:

(S5) How is fear shaping us?

How has fear shaped the way we engage with the world? Has our amygdala influenced our relationships with loved ones, jobs, quality of life, and politics? If Jesus can redeem all things, even politics, for good, then he can certainly redeem my lizard brain. He can break through the fog of fear with the sunshine of faith. This ties into our first sermon because fear limits us from seeing what God desires. Fear blinds us to the vision of flourishing God calls Christians to cultivate in our world.

More goes into flourishing than just “don’t be afraid,” which is why I’ve tried to summarize the most important concepts and commands that help us cultivate flourishing with the word “flourish.” We’re going to use it as an acronym to help us remember how to seek flourishing. You might have already guessed what the “F” stands for by our sermon title, “Faith, Not Fear.” This command comes from Jesus.

Did you know Jesus once preached a “political manifesto”⁶ where he explained his followers don’t have to be afraid? Before he gets there, Jesus begins his political manifesto at the Sermon on the Mount this way:

(S6) Matthew 5:3 (ESV)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Kingdom of heaven” is political language, the start of a political manifesto. With his very first words, Jesus begins to rewire how we think about our world. The poor in spirit aren’t the lowest of society. The homeless and oppressed, and spiritually weak aren’t cursed but blessed because God’s kingdom belongs to them. They have nothing to fear. Jesus kingdom, Jesus’ politics, flip the world’s expectations upside-down.

(S7) Jesus' kingdom is one of faith, not fear.

It's not the rich and powerful and those who dominate in politics who are secure, but the least of these. The kingdoms of this world operate on fear and power, but God's kingdom operates in faith and weakness. Towards the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages faith, not fear:

(S8) Matthew 6:28-30 (ESV)

28 And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

What a weird political manifesto! Jesus knows his followers are anxious, worried, and stressed about what they eat, drink and wear. They were anxious about their jobs and food supply, both political issues. And for some of them, this anxiety consumed them. But Jesus wants to expand their vision, to help them see the goodness God has for them. How do they see that?

(S9) Flowers! Flowers! Wildflowers grow without any help, and they look amazing. Look at these purple and blue “forget me not” flowers. Even perhaps the most successful politician in the whole Old Testament, King Solomon, who built the temple and established Israel as a global superpower during his reign, even he isn't as glorious as these flowers. And if flowers sprout one day and die the next, and God takes care of them, how much more will God take care of you and me? If God can cause flowers to flourish, he can take care of our flourishing too. *Jesus' kingdom is one of faith, not fear.*

(S10) Fear leads to fight, flight, or fusion, not faithful presence.

I believe Christ doesn't call believers to a posture of fear but a posture of faith. We find this call to faith in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, his political manifesto. First, Jesus challenges his believers to have greater faith, “O you of little faith,” and then he adds a positive exhortation of how we are to live:

(S11) Matthew 6:33 (ESV)

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

In other words, don't worry about your own flourishing, but live for Christ and his kingdom and his way of living envisioned in Matthew 5-7, and Jesus will take care of you. That's challenging because it's so easy to prioritize our fears instead of Christ and his kingdom. But we as Christians can walk by faith by taking a posture one author identifies as “faithful presence.”⁷ Being faithful to Jesus and present wherever he has us.

1. (S12) Faithful Presence

To be “faithful” is to trust and obey Jesus' teachings, the teachings found in Matthew 5-7, and the whole Scripture. That means Christians need to hold fast to the message that Jesus died and rose again and is both Savior of my soul and Lord of all of life, of my family, my career, my sexuality, my finances, my everything. But to be “faithful” and “present” is to live out our faith wherever God has placed us, in whatever setting or context, among our family members, at our jobs, in the public square (aka. politics). I have a fellow church-planting friend who I just talked with this week who is a pastor and is also running for city council. He tries to follow Jesus both in the church and public service and is trusting God to lead the way.

The idea of faithful presence is throughout the Sermon on the Mount, which is why I am contrasting it with where fear normally leads—fight, flight, or fusion, none of which express faith in God.

2. (S13) Fight

When our lizard brains are activated, we sometimes fight back, but Jesus says not to fight back:

(S14) Matthew 5:38-39 (ESV)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Jesus does not want his followers to fight their enemies, but to love them, to turn the other cheek. Not only is Jesus talking about physical violence, but insults as well. If you are right-handed, and you slap someone on their right cheek, you are giving them a back-handed slap, which stings not only their cheek but also their pride. Have you ever had anyone insult or attack your political beliefs? Jesus says to turn the cheek, to stay present and engaged even though it hurts.

But a fighting posture doesn't do that. A fight posture tries to overcome its opponents and to protect itself. In politics, this often looks like vilification of the other political party and their leaders and advocating for laws that protect my group at the cost of others. Fear doesn't help us love our neighbors and seek their good.

I've taken the “fight” approach to political engagement. When I arrived at college, I was ready to “do battle” with the liberals. There was truth in the things I said, but the manner in which I engaged was combative. I swore at one of my classmates for criticizing the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. **Faithful presence** wouldn't have reacted by fighting back but would try to ask questions to understand. Then maybe faithful presence would study Scripture to see how the Bible encourages freedom and liberty yet critiques the use of war and violence. That would be messy and difficult; faithful presence always is. At the end of my college career, I was having lunch with a classmate who snapped at me for my political views and told me they needed to be defeated. I've taken the posture of fight, and I've felt what it's like to be on the receiving end, and it doesn't feel good. *Fear leads to fighting, not flourishing, but faithful presence is different.* Fear also leads to:

3. (S15) Flight

What's another reaction to fear? Flight. Flight is when we withdraw from politics or culture or our neighbors because they are too risky and might corrupt us. We isolate to preserve our beliefs, group, and identity. Jesus' teachings are supposed to make us distinct from those around us but not to separate us. The type of distinction Jesus envisioned was one of flavor, of enriching the world. In his manifesto, he said this:

(S16) Matthew 5:13 (ESV)

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

Salt is not good on its own. Ever tried to eat a spoonful of salt? Did you know a spoonful of salt could kill you? A young man drank a bottle of soy sauce, and it almost killed him. He passed out, and his friends took him to the emergency room, where they flushed his system. He was in a coma for three days.⁸

Salt is best when it's mixed with other foods, like scrambled eggs. Scrambled eggs without salt are tasteless, but they're perfect with salt, cheese, and a little milk. Oh, so good! Salt brings out the flavor. Salt preserves food from going bad.⁹ That's what we as Christians are supposed to do, to bring out our world's flavor, and work to keep the world good. But instead, we've often retreated into safe Christian subcultures, into churches, into private schools and colleges, made our own record labels and publishing companies. In high school, my youth group, which was mostly Christians, attended a Christian conference where they were raising hundreds of thousands of dollars to build a Christian Facebook. That feels like flight to me. Faithful presence is being on Facebook and engaging with truth and compassion. *Fear doesn't lead to flourishing but to fighting back or fleeing from.* Fear also leads to:

4. (S17) Fusion

Fusion is when we become so afraid of our culture or peers that we give up our beliefs and identity and do what the world does. It's running into a barking dog and not fighting or fleeing, but curling up into a ball and hoping the dog goes away. We give up what makes us distinctive and assimilate into whoever is pressuring us, on the left or right. But this is not Jesus' way. Jesus calls us to be "salt" and "light" in our culture.

(S18) Matthew 5:14, 16 (ESV)

14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [...] 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Jesus was addressing his followers, the people who would become the church. He wanted them to stand out in the world, not blend in. This is hard because we are at the greatest risk of fusion when our friends and peers and the political party we like affirm something wrong. This is one reason we should be careful not to identify any one political party as the "Christian party."¹⁰ When we do so, the church loses its place as a light to the world, as "a city set on a hill." That title belongs to the church and the church alone. When the church is faithful to Jesus yet present in the world, not corrupted by partisanship or cultural pressures, it can be a shining city set on a hill. *Fear leads to fight, flight, or fusion, not faithful presence.*

(S19) Faith in Jesus makes faithful presence possible.

This comes down to one question. Who do you trust? Who do you believe? Do you believe in Jesus and trust him enough that if you seek his kingdom and his righteousness and don't run away, or fight back, that all these things will be added to you? That he will take care of you and work through you to make a difference?

Jesus practiced faithful presence. He didn't fight back as the rulers wrongly accused him. He didn't flee when he was hanging on the cross. He didn't fuse with the culture or even what his disciples expected. They didn't want him to go to the cross, but he did. Instead, Jesus was faithful to his Father and present wherever his Father led him, and it changed the world. Jesus preached a political manifesto that threatened the powers of the rulers and authorities, and that's why they crucified him. But because of the faithful presence of Jesus, because of his obedience and ministry, we can have eternal life and experience true and eternal flourishing.

If you are someone who struggles with fear, fear in politics, fear in anything, ask Jesus to come and cast out that fear so that you can be faithful and present wherever God calls you. I want to close by sharing a personal story because not succumbing to fear in politics is incredibly difficult. I'm learning what it means to be faithful and present in my political engagement, yet I have not arrived.

I served on one of our town's committees for about ten months and found it very challenging, and I wrestled with a lot of anxiety. In one meeting in-particular, I thought one of our committee members was proposing we vote our support for a bill I thought wasn't good for churches or any faith group, not just Christians, but Muslims too. We'll call that legislation the National bill.

I was taking the minutes when I thought I heard a team member propose we vote to affirm the National bill as a committee. I became so nervous that I recorded what I thought I'd heard, the National bill, when he proposed we support a local Beacon Hill bill, which was very different. At the end of the meeting, I summed up what I thought I'd heard, the proposal for the National bill. I gave it that name. I spent the next week thinking about how I was going to have to raise some concerns at the next meeting about our supporting the National bill, and it made me very nervous. I did research and prayed a lot about it.

When I finally reviewed the video of our meeting minutes to finalize them for our next meeting, I realized my fellow committee member had not proposed the National bill but the Beacon Hill bill. But it was too late because even though I tried to clarify, our subcommittee started calling the local Beacon Hill bill by the name of the big National bill, and the name stuck.

I let my lizard brain control me. Fear shaped what I heard and how I responded, and I accidentally introduced the very thing I didn't want. That's what fear does! Fear can't produce flourishing, only fight or flight, or in my case, confusion. I was willing to be faithful, but because I was fearful, it hindered me from being present when I needed to be. That's what fear does. It hinders flourishing.

A couple of weeks later, the Lord gave me the chance to speak up about this same issue a different way. Another group I care about published a statement opposing the National Bill in a way I thought was aggressive and unfair to the bill itself. While I agreed the National Bill was very unhelpful, I thought their statement was counterproductive. I told them why I didn't think their statement was helpful and tried to propose a different way that emphasized the common good. This led to a fruitful conversation where I learned some things I didn't know, and I felt heard. I felt like that was closer to faithful presence.

Taking a posture of faithful presence is difficult. I tried to do it on both sides, not fusing but also not fighting back. However, faithful presence does mean being present, which I can say is no longer the case for me as I stepped off the town committee. But as the Spirit leads me elsewhere, I hope to be faithful and present when given the opportunity, and I hope you will as well. *How should we engage in politics? With faith, not fear. Faith in Jesus makes faithful presence possible.*

Benediction - 1 John 4:18-19 (ESV)

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. 19 We love because he first loved us.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my second sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series. Next Sunday, I'm looking forward to our additional teaching and discussion during our 9:00 to 10:00 AM (New Time!) adult Christian education hour on Zoom or in the church sanctuary. I hope you can join us. Like last week, here are several follow-up spiritual exercises for all who want to dive deeper into this series:

1. **Observe:** What's the usual way you watch or listen to the news? TV? Internet? Podcast? This time when you listen, practice identifying any usage of fear to engage the audience. Be mindful of your heart and emotions. Does what is being communicated cause you to feel anxiety or stress? Read Matthew 5-7 and make a note of all the ways the passage encourages believers to live by faith.
2. **Listen (sermon):** Listen to God, *Politics, and the Church: Resisting the Politics of Fear* by Pastor Rich Villodas of New Life Fellowship Church New York City (47 minutes – October 25, 2020). YouTube: <https://youtu.be/9y5HH0DGnKo> This sermon also tackles the problem of fear in politics and is worth listening to as we consider how to engage by faith, not fear, in our world.
3. **Read (beginner):** Read the short but memorable digital book *The Voting Booth: A new vision for Christian engagement in a post-Christian culture* by Skye Jethani (2016; 64 pages). Jethani creates an allegory for the ways believers have historically engaged in politics: fight and flight, and proposes an alternative, faithfulness leading to flourishing.
4. **Read (advanced):** For those who want a much more in-depth review of this sermon's fourfold paradigm and the history of those who have engaged this way, please read *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* by James Davidson Hunter (2010; 368 pages). We have one copy available in our Cornerstone church library.
5. **Pray:** Take time to pray that you and your family would engage in the world with faith instead of fear. Identify the fears you have been operating under and confess them to the Lord. Ask him to lift the burden of your worries off you so you can practice faithful presence and seek the flourishing of those around you.

Thank you, and may you sense the faithful presence of Jesus Christ in your life.

In Christ,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

P.S. If you missed last week's follow-up sermon by Tim Mackie, [here's a link](#).

Sermon Slides

See sermon slides through [the website posting](#).

Discussion Questions

See Sunday school/small group discussion slides on [the website posting](#).

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Endnotes

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1. “Amygdala Hijack: When Emotion Takes Over” healthline, published September 17, 2021, accessed October 4, 2021 <https://www.healthline.com/health/stress/amygdala-hijack#takeaway>.
 2. Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 50-53, Kindle. Steinke talks a lot about the amygdala and lizards, which is where I got my basic info for this portion of my sermon.
 3. “Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016,” Pew Research Center, published June 22, 2016, accessed October 4, 2021 <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/>.
 4. John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018) 37, Kindle.
 5. “Granny Off the Cliff” TheAgendaProject, YouTube, published May 17, 2011, accessed October 4, 2021 <https://youtu.be/OGnE83A1Z4U>.
 6. Tim Mackie, *Lecture on the Early Church & Politics*, YouTube, Tim Mackie Archives, published August 15, 2017, accessed September 27, 2021 <https://youtu.be/wXcSJW8rg4>.
 7. James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 272, Kindle.
 8. Tia Ghose, “Man dared to drink quart of soy sauce almost dies from salt poisoning,” published June 7, 2013, accessed September 28, 2021 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/man-dared-to-drink-quart-of-soy-sauce-almost-dies-from-salt-poisoning/>.
 9. “Tim Keller | What a Minor Prophet Teaches Us About Nationalism and Race, Grace, and Mission,” YouTube, published April 3, 2019, accessed October 9, 2021, <https://youtu.be/Uj8j03TadOg>.
 10. Timothy Keller, *How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't*, The New York Times, September 29, 2018, accessed October 4, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>.