Identity in Christ, Identity in Crisis

Series: Beyond the Ballot **Date:** Sunday, November 8, 2026
Passage: Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Jeremiah 29:5-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-2; Philippians 4:6-8

Key Principle: *Don't let politics become a club sport.*

Good morning, Menlo Church, and welcome to the final week of our series, "Beyond the Ballot." Special shout-out to our campuses in San Mateo, Menlo Park, Mountain View, Saratoga, and those of you joining us online. You did it.

For many of us, this past week brought one last wave of ads and mailers as we waited to see what Wednesday held. And for many of you, Wednesday morning brought some things you felt like you lost, and some things you felt like you won.

A few races around our state and country are still being counted, but I know some of you are bracing for the people you didn't vote for to use their new power against the people you did. And I know some of you feel relief this morning, and that's okay.

If you're carrying a loss this week, grieve it. If you're feeling like you won, great. Just don't worship it. In the world of politics and power that we've been talking about for 4 weeks, the greatest wins are temporary, and so are the deepest losses.

Today, we're going to talk about where we go from here. But before we do, I want to pray for us. And if you're new, or newer, and have never heard me preach before, I pray kneeling. I do it to recognize the King that we talked about last week, God's final King, who served us by dying for us.

Now that the election is over, everyone has to answer a question, whether out loud or in our own minds: how much of my life should politics get? For many of us, the honest answer this week feels like "less, please."

And for others, it's "more than ever, because look at what just happened." I want to help us answer it with something a little steadier than how we feel in the days after a contentious election.

I've been in ministry in some form for about 25 years, and I spent many of those early years with students. I played sports growing up, until a couple of knee injuries cut that short, but I was never as good as a lot of the athletes I got to serve in student ministry.

I learned a lot watching them and their families. And if you've had a kid in sports around here, you know there are basically 3 tiers: rec league, school team, and club. Each tier takes a different amount of your life. And I think each one teaches us something about politics, too.

So the first one that I want to talk about is rec league, where politics has an end date. Rec league is where most of us started. It has a start date and an end date, and it usually fits into a break or the summer. There's a snack schedule, and a team name that somebody's little brother picked.

Nobody's identity rides on a rec league, or at least it shouldn't. And the best thing about it is that it ends. The last game happens, the season's over, and everybody goes back to the rest of their lives.

That isn't a lack of commitment; it's just how seasons work. And it turns out it's how God built the world. A book in the Bible, written by someone who watched people chase just about everything, is called Ecclesiastes. And the writer, Solomon, calls himself the Preacher.

He's brutally honest about how little of what we work for under the sun actually lasts. In the middle of that honesty, he writes one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. He says, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."

Then he lists them: a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to break down, and a time to build up. Ecclesiastes 3:1-3. Seasons aren't a failure of nerve. They're God's design. Every farmer knows that. And so does every good coach.

Notice where the Preacher puts all of this: under heaven. Every season on his list sits under something bigger than itself, and politics is one of them. And look at the list again. There are fourteen pairs, and nobody gets to live only on the good side of them.

There's a time to break down and a time to build up, and this week a lot of us got a little of both. That doesn't mean something's broken. It means you're living under heaven. And in verse 7, the Preacher, Solomon, says that there's "a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." We just came through a long season of speaking. Some of us need permission to hear that this might be the other season. Your convictions didn't change, buut the season did. So let the season actually end.

That might be as simple as texting "STOP" to every campaign, every PAC, and every list that you got added to this year. Do it this afternoon. Your phone will get quieter, and maybe you will too. And decide now when your next season starts.

You don't have to sign up for 2 straight years of the next race just because the people selling it already have. Maybe you start paying attention to 2028 when the primaries begin.

But I can't leave it at a rec league, because some things deserve more than a few weeks of our attention every couple of years. Rec league politics shows up, votes, and then goes back to the couch. Our neighbors need more from us than that.

Which leads me to the second tier of the way we think about sports, and that is the school team, where real work has to live inside of real life. The second tier is more serious. There are tryouts, real expectations, practice on most days, and sometimes even an off-season training program.

But a school team is built to fit inside of a student's life. The coaches know that that kid also has a chemistry test on Tuesday, and a family waiting at home. The season is intense, and it still ends.

And a good school athlete doesn't treat the off-season as nothing. Nobody sees the conditioning they do while they get ready, but when the season comes back around, it shows. Ask anyone who's played a contact sport what the off-season is really for.

By the end of a football season, nobody is fully healthy. Everybody's taped up, sore, playing through something. The off-season is when your body finally gets a chance to heal. You don't get ready for next season by playing hurt longer. You get ready by getting healthy.

God's people learned what that looks like in one of the hardest political seasons in their history. Babylon had overpowered Jerusalem and carried the king and thousands of its people into exile.

The exiles had 2 options: some wanted to fight, and the revolt against Babylon eventually brought Jerusalem down. Others wanted to wait it out. A prophet named Hananiah was telling everyone it would all be over in 2 years, so there was no reason to unpack yet.

Then Jeremiah sends a letter, and God gives them a third way. He says this: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters… But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Jeremiah 29:5-7.

Did you catch what sits next to each other in that letter? Seeking the good of the city is right beside building a house, planting a garden, and raising a family. God doesn’t ask them to put their lives on hold for the cause. He tells them to practice civic faithfulness inside ordinary life. That’s a school team.

The word translated “welfare” is “shalom.” It’s the wholeness and flourishing that God wants for an entire community, not just for the people who agree with you. I need to be careful here, because some of us just heard Babylon and pictured whoever won on Tuesday.

Babylon isn’t the other party. Babylon is any city that isn’t the kingdom of God. And that includes the city where your side just won. Every one of us woke up on Wednesday in a city that we didn’t fully choose. Notice too that God says, “the city where I have sent you.”

He claims the placement. This isn’t an endorsement of Babylon. It’s a reminder that you aren’t here by accident, and neither is your neighbor. Look at that verse again. In Hebrew, the word shalom appears three times: seek the shalom of the city, pray for it, because in its shalom you’ll find your shalom.

Your peace is tied up with your neighbor’s peace, including the neighbor who voted the other way. And God tells them to pray for Babylon. Not about Babylon. For it. That’s the city that had just dragged them away from home.

A few verses later, He tells them how long they’ll be there: seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10). That’s way more than two years; that’s grandkids. God asked His people to think in generations while everyone around them was thinking in headlines.

The most quoted verse in this letter ends up on graduation cards and coffee mugs: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). That word welfare is shalom again.

God said it to people who had just lost, people He’d told to unpack for seventy years. The hope didn’t come from winning the next round. It came while they built houses and planted gardens in a city they didn’t choose. Exile is where God healed His people of the idols that got them there.

A chapter later, God says it plainly: “I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal” (Jeremiah 30:17).

So what does the off-season look like for you? Two years ago, at the end of another series on faith and politics, I gave you 6 ways to engage from Joshua Ryan Butler’s book, The Party Crasher. They’re worth hearing again.

There’s the local option, where you focus on the place you know best and have the most influence: a school, a city council, a local nonprofit. There’s the Daniel option, for those of you carrying a Jesus-first life into rooms of real power and influence.

And there’s the prophetic option. And I’ll say it again: the more excited you are about this one, the less likely you should pursue it. There’s the scuba option, where you pick one issue and go deep enough to actually move it.

There's the monastic option, which isn't hiding from the world; it's building a community that lives the way of Jesus so visibly that others want in. And there's the reform option, working on the systems that make every debate feel impossible.

You don't have to do all 6. You aren't called to carry all of it. And doing none of it isn't an option. All 6 are available to each of us on some level.

Three weeks ago, we talked about the people underneath the mailers: the teacher who can't afford to live where she teaches, the shop owner who goes under if customers can't park. Whatever passed this week, they're still our neighbors.

If you don't know where to start, For The Bay is a great place to begin, looking at community partnerships and ways to roll up your sleeves and get involved.

One more practice for the off-season: pray by name for one person who won this week that you didn't vote for. Paul told Timothy to pray for kings and all who hold high positions, and he wrote that under an emperor, or nobody in the church had voted for him. 1 Timothy 2:1-2. That one is hard for all of us, which is probably why it matters.

And notice why Paul says to pray that way: "that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life." The point of praying for people in power was never to win. It was to be free to live quietly and faithfully wherever God placed you. That's the off-season.

Rec league reminds us that politics has an end date. The school team reminds us that it deserves real work in real life. But there's a third tier, and if we're honest, a lot of us have been living in it.

The third tier is club: politics without an off-season. And before I say anything else, hear me: if your kid plays club, or you do, I'm not telling you to quit. Some of you love it, and some of your kids are thriving in it. Stay with me anyway. Club takes something that used to be a season, and it turns it into the whole year.

Some families stack club on top of the school team, and maybe a rec league too, until the sport sits at the center of the family calendar. A lot of what drives that is a fear of falling behind, usually wrapped in the dream of a college scholarship.

The American Academy of Pediatrics calls that belief misguided. Only about 1% of high school athletes receive an athletic scholarship. And it costs a lot. The average family spent just over $1,000 on a child's primary sport in 2024, which was up 46% over the previous 5 years.

Club runs are even higher than that, and around here you already know what it costs. Pediatricians have also linked year-round single-sport training to overuse injuries, burnout, anxiety, and depression. Kids' bodies and minds weren't built to run one thing all year.

Now think about our politics. The season never ends, the fear of falling behind keeps it moving, a lot of money changes hands, and people are wearing down. This election season is barely over, and the next one is already underway.

All week I've heard that the 2028 presidential campaign started the day the midterms ended. Nationally, that's probably true, but in your life, it doesn't have to be. These midterms became the most expensive election cycle in our country's history for political advertising.

California led the nation, with over a billion dollars projected across our media markets. If you haven't gotten your first 2028 fundraising text yet, give it a week. I'm not blaming any one person or any side on this. This is true on every side of every issue, and it comes down to incentives.

Nobody in the system that I'm describing gets paid when you feel settled. Nobody gets rich off your peace. When politics becomes a club sport, there's no off-season, so nobody ever heals. We just keep playing hurt. If this church put out an injury report this week, a lot of us would be listed as questionable.

So it's worth asking: what's the political version of an overuse injury in your life? Maybe it's a strained relationship, or a sibling you stopped calling, or who stopped calling you. Maybe it's the way your chest tightens when the phone buzzes because you're anticipating bad news.

So let me ask you a question. Are you happy with this? I don't mean the results. I mean how it feels to live inside it: the constant urgency, and how every family dinner seems one sentence away from a fight. I get it. Most of us can't remember it ever being different.

But it hasn't always worked like this. In 1976, a young pollster wrote a memo to an incoming president arguing that governing would now require a continuing campaign. A few years later, a journalist named it: the permanent campaign. That's not a law of nature.

Someone wrote it down about fifty years ago as a strategy, and followers of Jesus are free not to live by it. This whole year at Menlo, we've been talking about reclaiming the way of Jesus. Before anyone called them Christians, the first followers of Jesus were simply called the Way.

The first time the Way sparked a riot was because it was bad for business. In Ephesus, a silversmith named Demetrius stirred up the whole city because so many people were following Jesus that they stopped buying the silver shrines he made (Acts 19:23-27).

Nobody was getting rich off their peace either. In the second century, Tertullian wrote that the people around the church watched how Christians cared for orphans, the elderly, the poor, and prisoners, and said, "See how they love one another." They didn't change their world by out-shouting it. They lived differently in public, and people noticed.

So how do we push back without just joining another team? Start small. Take one day a week with no political news at all. The doctors prescribe that much for kids, and you need it too. Keep at least one real friendship with someone who votes differently than you, and protect it.

And actually, specialization shrinks us. It shrinks us athletically and ideologically. In week 1 we said that when politics becomes primary, identity becomes fragile. A school team assumes you have a life. A club team asks you to rebuild your life around it.

And when the national club runs all year, the neighborhood runs thin. That's how local civic life has gotten hollowed out. The feed keeps the club running all year, and it does it on purpose. We're going to start unpacking that next week in our new series, Becoming in the Age of Algorithms…

So why does the club never feel finished? Back in Ecclesiastes, a few verses after his list of seasons, the Preacher, Solomon, gives us the answer. He says, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart." Ecclesiastes 3:11.

You were made with something eternal in you. And when politics runs all year, it's trying to make a season carry eternity. And it can't. Last week we said a ballot can carry your vote, but it can't carry your hope. That's why the next election always shows up before you've caught your breath.

The eternity in your heart was made for a King, not a campaign. And the Preacher doesn't stop there. The rest of the verse says we "cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." We only ever see the middle of the story.

Every election gets sold to us as the ending, the most important vote of our lifetime, the last chance before it all falls apart. The Preacher says you've never once seen the ending. God has. That isn't a reason to stop caring. It's a reason to stop panicking.

And the King that we talked about last week doesn't run on seasons. His mercy was new on Wednesday morning, before any of us checked our phones. Paul knew that. While in Roman custody, he wrote a letter to the church at Philippi; he had every reason to be consumed by politics.

He told them: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

That word "guard" is a military word. Philippi was a Roman colony settled by retired soldiers, so the first listeners knew exactly what a guard post looked like. Paul says God's peace stands watch over your heart like that.

Then he tells them where to direct their attention. "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Your attention is exactly what the club is buying. Paul says you get to decide where it goes.

The word Paul uses for "think" is an accounting word. It means to reckon, to take stock, to count something as your own. What you take in will leak out. So try running your feed through Paul's list this week. Before you share something, ask if it's true. If it is, ask if it's honorable. Then ask if it's just. You'll be surprised how much doesn't make it past the first question.

Thanksgiving is less than 3 weeks away. Most of us will sit across from someone who voted differently than us. Decide before you walk in what you won't say. Then go enjoy the people that God has given you.

Now, the same pediatricians who warn about year-round training also write a prescription. They recommend kids take at least 3 months off from their main sport every year, in one-month blocks, plus a day or two off every week. Doctors aren't quoting Scripture, but they're describing something God built into creation long before anyone had a club team. So as we finish this series and head into the next 2 years, don't let politics become a club sport.

Picture what happens when a family actually takes that month off. One weekend, there's no practice and no tournament drive. A kid sits down at the family table, and nobody's watching the clock. For a few weeks, they just get to be a kid, a son or a daughter again. That's what healthy looks like. That's what's waiting for you on the other side of the season. Whatever you won or lost on Tuesday, you're allowed to come home to the people around the table, and to the God whose mercy was there before the polls ever opened.

Thank you for staying at the table these 4 weeks. Many of you did it with people who see the world very differently than you do. That's what the church is supposed to look like. Let me pray this over you as we go. May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.