

An Election Day Sermon
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When I was growing up, I was taught that if you wanted to get along in life, there were three things you *never* talked about in polite company. I bet you were, too. The three topics I am thinking of are religion, sex and politics. Now, mine was not a church going family, so I have never been clear whether congregations are considered *polite company*. However, since we talk about religion all the time, maybe we're not.

But those two other topics...well, they tend to cause a stir when you bring them into worship. Now, don't worry, sex is still off limits. *For today anyhow*. But I do want to talk about politics. Not because this election is the most important election in dozens of years, or even the most important election ever, as some news programs tell you. I am not fit to judge that. This will only be the sixth Presidential election for which I am eligible to vote. But, I have noticed that despite all the talk about how historic and unique this election is; it all seems kind of familiar. Sure we have an African American male candidate, and a white female candidate in the mix this time around, and that's all to the good. But many of the issues of this campaign have been talked about in many election cycles even before I could vote: energy independence, the latest war, the condition of the economy.

Instead, I want to talk to you about politics because it has been part of our religious heritage. Up into the eighteen hundreds it was a tradition for the pastor of the local church to assemble the congregation and expound at length about which Christian virtues were best exemplified by which candidate; and then to endorse one of them as the right Christian choice. This was usually done on the Sunday immediately before the election, but as we are busy with All Saints and All Souls' Day next week, we are getting to it a bit early.

Admittedly, it was a very different environment in the early 1600s to 1800s in America. Women of any background and any people of color weren't yet allowed to vote. And they certainly were not candidates for office. So, the Election Day Sermon was not exactly an act of pure democracy. The white male clergy assembled a congregation led by white men to encourage them to choose the correct white man to join other white men in leading the town while perhaps the women and enslaved African Americans looked on from a distance. So, things *have* improved some. Everyone is now allowed and encouraged to participate in voting. At least when everything goes well.

The relationship of the church to the town was different back then, too. You were only *allowed* to vote if you were a church member, which you had to be in order to belong to a town in the first place. There was certainly not wall of separation between Church and State for the Pilgrims

and Puritans. The authority of Church and State each leaned heavily upon one another for many years. The Pilgrims and Puritans joined together into what became known as the Church of the Standing Order, and also Congregationalists. They were the only religious game in town for many years. As you may know, donating money to a church was not an optional activity when the American experiment was young.

Even here in this church, there were once mandatory prices assigned to each and every seat. It was called the pew tax. If you went on a bell tower tour last Sunday, you would have seen the remnant of the door to the pew boxes that once filled this Sanctuary. Each pew box seated a family, and each one came with a price—often painted onto the pews under a cushion. Now, this may surprise you; but as the pews got closer to the pulpit they cost more! Can you imagine? Today we would have to make the most expensive ones beginning in the middle and going to the back.

Since that time, things have changed considerably. The Church of the Standing Order did not last forever. It was disestablished by 1833. Since then, the relationship of Church and town has become increasingly divided. Neither can tax the other anymore. Church membership no longer has any impact on our ability to vote. Then there's the little matter of the relationship of Church and State. According to current U.S. Law, I am not *allowed* to direct your choice of an elected official in any way from the pulpit. Admittedly, some Pastors ignore this and fill their churches with political pamphlets, and voting guides, and even name their favorite candidate as the only "appropriate" vote for a Christian. Can you imagine me, in this day and age, telling you who you should support politically *as a Christian*?

This morning's reading does that. I think that is part of why it sounds a little out of touch. Paul's letter to the Romans states flat out that every person should be "subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God."¹ Apparently Paul believes we should support whoever is in office. He even goes so far as to suggest that the Roman authorities put in their offices by God. I have to say that I bristle at that.

Now, admittedly, representational democracy was never on the table as an option for Paul. Things just didn't work like that in ancient Rome. Indeed, the Roman Emperors had a habit of declaring themselves as gods in their own right. Accordingly, Paul may have been practicing a little subversion here. He may have been cheekily placing the appointment of Emperors in the hands of his own God rather than letting Emperors claim any divine status of their own. Paul may also have been declaring an unassailable allegiance to God, and trusting fully in God's

¹ Romans 13:1.

providence, regardless of the activities of earthly authorities. Maybe. It's also true that when Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans that the Emperor Nero had not yet begun to discriminate against Christians as he would later. It is much easier to think of a leader as divinely appointed when they aren't using your people as fodder for the coliseum or as torches to light the way to the capital city.² Later authors of Christian Scripture were not so kind in their assessment of Nero.³ So, perhaps our friend Paul is not the person to turn to for political advice in the first decade of the 21st century since Jesus' birth.

Besides, many modern Christians decry the affiliation of politics and religion. Why mix the two? I have heard it said by members of this congregation that Church is no place for politics. I can understand those views. It can certainly feel like politics gets an undue share of attention in our lives. Especially during election seasons. It feels right sometimes to just let church be church, and to claim our sanctuary as a space away from the business of the rest of life. But, I have at least two problems with those views. First of all, there are many people who claim to be voting based on religious principles whenever they vote. That would seem to suggest that religion and politics can mix, and do.

Often, they rally around hot button topics such as abortion, or gay marriage which receive a lot of attention during political campaigns, and then fade into the background till the next go around. Now, if they feel strongly about those issues, they should certainly be voting around them. But the fact remains that our national debt is staggering, our economy is in a huge mess, our environment is challenged, and as the richest country in the world, we have many too many poor people. And the question for Christians as I understand it is: what would Jesus say about all that? What would Jesus do about national debt, the economy, the environment and the poor?

What was it he said about the poor, again? Oh, yeah: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."⁴ He even went so far as to tell one rich young man that in order to be perfect he should sell his "possessions, and give the money to the poor..."⁵ Decidedly political statements for a man of God.

Jesus demonstrates that religion is inherently political, no matter how much we might like to separate politics and religion. That's why Jesus Christ was murdered under Roman authority: he

² These vile acts are attested to in the book *Annals*, by the Roman historian Tacitus, which was written in the mid to late 60s C.E. Nero also blamed the burning of Rome on the Christians, in which he himself had part, in 64 C.E., which made it possible to harass them in such vile ways.

³ See especially Revelation, which is a thinly veiled commentary on Roman authority.

⁴ Luke 6:20.

⁵ Matthew 19:21.

presented a political threat with his religious ideology. Both religion and politics center on the ways that people relate to one another and make statements about human nature in the process. So the question before us on Election Day is what do we want to say about human nature in the voting booth? As human beings we like to play games where we divide ourselves into pieces. Our political selves think one way; our religious selves think another way; our artistic and practical sides are always at odds; and our parenting selves are really strict, despite how wild we were as kids.

But the fact is that God gave us our *selves* in the first place. In our shared tradition, we understand that each one of us is made in God's image and reflects God's holiness in some way. Election Day is another day to own that. Election Day is another opportunity to unite our fractured lives and act as whole people. So, on Election Day, don't leave God behind when you step into the voting booth. Remember what we talk about here each Sunday.

Don't compartmentalize your life and leave your religious life behind. The Tuesday after next, walk into that booth and vote for the person who will bring this nation a little closer to God. You and I may disagree on which candidate does that. That's OK. We don't have to agree to vote our consciences. But if we leave our understanding of God behind when we vote, we will be turning our backs on our congregational tradition. We will be turning our backs on our religious selves. We will be turning away from our relationship with God. No candidate is worth that.

I cannot tell you for whom to vote. But I encourage you to vote prayerfully. Bring God with you into the voting booth. When you cast your ballot, do so as a whole person. Let your vote help bring this country a little closer to God; however you understand God to be.

Amen.