**What in Jesus’ Name are we going to do about our Politics?**

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Sometimes when someone asks the wrong question, there’s a right question hiding inside of it. At the Advent Fair, David Woodward won the right to pick the sermon topic for today. Wanting me to address something about how faith should affect our politics, he chose the title, ‘Was Jesus a Democrat or a Republican?” Tthat’s the wrong question. It’s the wrong question because it presupposes a rigid binary framework for a faithful Christian’s involvement in politics. Worse, the question frames the issue as one in which I am to anoint a clear winner and loser, and then nicely ratchets up the emotional stakes by bringing Jesus into the picture.

But within this wrong question, is a right question. A good question. And the question is this: What, in Jesus name, are we going to do about our politics?

Because, my sisters and brothers, when it comes to our politics as a nation we are stuck. It isn’t hard to see. As I write this sermon, it is unclear whether the Federal Government will even be open at the time I deliver it. Our shared commitment to basic self-governance has atrophied to the point where things like health insurance for poor children and military spending and humane treatment for undocumented people are treated as political footballs to be carelessly fumbled in a narcissistic blame game. We are stuck in a political system so steeped in money, media, and gerrymandering to the point where at every level of society we seem poised to alienate, villainize, and in some cases even physically attack those who see things differently than we do. In the words of Homer, Alaska’s most famous musician, “These foolish games are tearing us apart.”

We can lament this reality, and we should. But as Christians, we must resist the slide into hopelessness. We must remember that “nothing is impossible with God.” We must ask ourselves, what, in Jesus name, can we do about our politics.

To ask this question is to admit not just a disgust with the present, but a yearning for a transformed future. For, as I have preached from this pulpit many times in different ways, Jesus is always future oriented. In his earthly life, Jesus was drawn deeper into each phase of his ministry towards the future event of his rising. In his call of Andrew and Peter and James and John and the other disciples, he re-oriented the trajectories of their lives, so they were no longer limited by the past from which they had come, but now drawn into the future which Jesus imagined for them. In his healing miracles Jesus never the ill asks about the past, about what happened to make them sick. He asks about whether they have a vision of a transformed future: “Do you wish you be made well?”

Our vision of a transformed future isn’t hard to conjure. It’s one in which the unity we share as sisters and brothers living together in community breeds a sense of mutual respect that helps us sustain relationships when there is political disagreement. It’s one in which ideology and political values still matter, but far less than a sense of shared purpose and togetherness in the project of self-government.

But this isn’t a civics class, it’s a sermon. So the question is what, in Jesus’ name, are we going to do about our politics? Note, by the way, the question isn’t, what do we need *other people* to do….it’s what are we going to do. This is a harder question. But following Jesus isn’t always easy.

We’re not the first Christians to have asked this question in recent times. As the 20th century unfolded, there were at least three strands of Christian theology developing that offered different takes on how faithful Christians might express their political vocations. Each has some lessons we might take to heart in our time and place.

The first is the fundamentalist movement, which began in the late 19th century and evolved in several ways throughout the 20th. The theological foundation of this approach to political life was a future vision of moral calamity. Sinfulness and disobedience to God has so overwhelmed most of society that the end times felt very near. At first, the fundamentalists responded by advocating total political withdrawal. Participation in politics, even in civic life and institutions was seen as a threat to the spiritual purity required of believers. Their goal was to be a faithful remnant whom God would save in the rapture before the ultimate destruction of the world. Of course, as the end times didn’t come, this approach evolved in the last century into what some now call the evangelical movement. Their political vocation centers around using electoral power to legislate particular theological priorities into policy. Essentially the approach retains a sense that they are the faithful moral remnant, but grafts onto it a zeal for reforming others through institutional power. I don’t think it is too harsh to call this approach something like an indirect theocracy.

Despite this, from the evangelical/fundamentalist movements we are reminded that our political activity ought to be integrated with our life of faith. What we believe should translate to how we organize, advocate, and participate in shaping our common life. Even more importantly, we ought to *pray* about *how* *we act* in the public square, whether it be digital or analog. We should believe that God wants our behavior in this part of our lives to be as integrated with our love for Christ as every other part. However, their experience also cautions us to avoid believing that the success of our political priorities matters more to God than the love and respect which we have for each other.

A second 20th century school of thought were the war theologians, such Barth, Niebuhr, Bultman, William Temple in England, and others. The theological context of their approach to faith and politics was the chaos of the two world wars. They understood the depths of humanity’s propensity to political violence as sinful, and believed that politics could be a force for good to curtail those impulses. They felt that strong institutions were the key to building a Christ’s kingdom on universal brotherhood. This is an oversimplification to be sure, but in general, they believed that a Christian’s role in politics required the personal support of and participation in the religious and civic institutions that were protecting the world from evil. Functioning politics comes from shared investment in and sacrifices made to build up the strength of governments and the reach and influence of the churches to combat moral evil.

The experiences of the war theologians remind us not to reject the role of civic institutions. They provide a baseline of social stability and peace. But these institutions (governments, the media, our financial system, etc.) have moral responsibilities, and part of our political vocation as Christians is to support them in their work of being bulwarks against violence, hatred and war. We must participate in such institutions in ways that help them actually be places that promote unity across difference, dignity for all, and a sense of universal community that transcends the political morass rather than sinks down into it. We may not be power players in these institutions, but we are consumers and participants in them. We can change for example, how and how often we consume political media that steeps us in a rhetoric of alienation.

A third approach, arising in the second half of the 20th century, emerged from quite different contexts. The Liberation Theology movements were concerned with the failure of politics to bring about justice for all people – particularly those on the margins of institutional life and with little social power. Writing from the rural poverty of Latin American countrysides, from the black communities within urban American centers, from the first and second wave feminist movements, and from other sites of marginalization, these theologians (Gustavo Gutierrez, James Cone, and [Rosemary Radford Ruether](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosemary_Radford_Ruether)) had an inherent distrust of institutions that perpetuate systems of oppression, poverty and social control. To them, the faithful Christian’s political vocation was to challenge institutions that failed to serve those with the least power. But their sense of the political vocation goes deeper than simply responding to institutions. This approach looks to the life of Jesus for inspiration to build relational communities of resistance, affirmation and hope among marginalized people. It is rooted in cultivating a willingness to make sacrifices to walk in the ways of Jesus: by standing up for the voiceless, speaking truth to power, and growing in holiness through commitment to communitarian living and values.

The Liberationists encourage us to remember that no matter how alienated or disempowered we might feel from the way our politics is at the moment, God wants change to begin with us. Jesus’ ministry on earth was especially directed towards those who felt themselves to be outsiders, who didn’t think that what they did or said mattered to anyone. Jesus gathered such folks into community with each other, invited them to share core values of love and justice and compassion together and to invite others into that experience. This is what politics (with a lower case p) looks like in the Kingdom of God. It’s the kind of politics Jesus practiced – relational, local, persistent, and focused on the most vulnerable. Perhaps this means we need to be doing whatever we can to build up authentic and lasting relationships with those whose politics differ from our own, by using other shared identities as starting points. This is hard, but again, following Jesus isn’t always easy.

We have hardly begun to answer the question of what in Jesus Name we are going to do about our politics. But we’ve at least sketched out a few principles to get us started. None of these are panaceas, but they remind us that the relationship between faith and politics is not just about winning elections and dictating policy. It’s about how we choose to acknowledge our shared community, how we choose to be in relationship with each other across all kinds of difference.

Our spiritual ancestors in the last century faced their own challenging political circumstances and had the courage to ask what God would have them do in response. And this gives us some solace that our struggles have moral worth, our efforts are pleasing to God, and we need not get it perfectly right to make progress towards becoming the beloved community that we yearn to be. Amen.