

CHRISTIANS AND CITIZENS

Deuteronomy 10: 17-21

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When Margie Fehlner told me she'd won the auction item and would be selecting the sermon theme for one Sunday this summer, she had a twinkle in her eye. She threatened to choose something extremely challenging, some obscure scripture text perhaps. And I know there are some parishioners who would have relished in doing just that! But Margie and I sat down to talk about various options and she said, "What I really want to hear is how we're supposed to cope during this election season. What are we, as Christians, supposed to be doing? How are we going to treat each other?" (Like that's not challenging.)

Then we began looking at dates, and we decided that a sermon about the current election season would be perfect on this day, July 3, a day we think about what it means to be both citizens and Christians. On this day we recognize that we have what are sometimes competing loyalties. We pledge allegiance to the flag, and we take baptismal vows. If we try to be faithful to both, we will sometimes face difficult decisions.

It was the same in Jesus' time. "No one can have two masters," he said. Remember the time the Pharisees and the Herodians both tried to trap him by asking him a trick question? The question was, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If he said, "No," he would be in trouble with King Herod's people who demanded loyalty to the Roman Empire. If he said, "Yes," he would be in trouble with his own people who found it horrendously immoral that they had to pay a tax to support their own oppression. So what did he say? "Give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor and give to God what belongs to God." Not only was it a clever answer, it was an answer that revealed Jesus' deepest loyalty. For doesn't everything, ultimately, belong to God?

It's an interesting time to live in Cleveland, isn't it? From the thrill of victory at long-last, to the renovation of downtown...and now we hold our breaths that the Republican National Convention will go well and without violent incident, that the press about the city will be positive, that the newly-opened hotels will remain profitable in the long run, that eventually all of the excitement will create good news for those who need it the most.

For it is those who need it the most that we are called to care for. The scripture Phil read for us makes that abundantly clear. God cares about justice for the orphan and the widow. God pours out love on strangers, and provides them with food and clothing. Widows and orphans and strangers, those three, mentioned throughout the Hebrew scriptures. They are the ones about whom we are to pay attention. Their wellbeing is our primary concern. Because they are the ones left behind, left without any means to support themselves, left on the side of the road to beg for what they need. Because no other provision of law or society looks out for them. They are the most vulnerable, the ones in need of compassion and justice. They provide the litmus test of justice and righteousness. Whenever God wants to see how Israel is doing, "Are they living up to what I've asked of them?," all God needs to do is look at how the widows and orphans and strangers are being treated.

If we want to know who God is looking out for today, we simply ask, "Who are the most vulnerable?"

The New York Times published an article on Cleveland this past Tuesday. It featured a picture of the gorgeous new public square, and the headline, "A Revitalized Cleveland Is Ready for its Close-up". The article talked about LeBron and the breathtakingly beautiful downtown Heinen's, and the jobs in the biomedical industry. It also mentioned the disconnect between the prosperous downtown and the city's poorest neighborhoods, and the nearly 37% poverty rate, one of the nation's highest. Who would God be concerned with? Do we even have to ask? Widows and orphans and strangers. It really hasn't changed that much. 37% poverty, many of

them single parents and their children. Hunger is a daily reality. Neighborhoods called food deserts where they don't expect a showplace of a grocery store, just anywhere they can purchase something healthy. Adequate and affordable housing. The ability to walk to school without worrying about random gunfire.

Poverty is not an issue you hear much from either political candidate because it's not an issue that drives votes. It's not an issue voters care about. In one recent poll, poverty ranked 10th on a list of issues. If you look at how often it's mentioned in the Bible, you wonder why more people of faith have not demanded that our candidates describe their strategies for poverty reduction. If you hear someone say that they are choosing which candidates to support based on which one is more Christian, ask that person this, "Are you demanding that poverty be higher on the agenda of your political party platform?" If we aren't speaking up for the poor, for the widow, the orphan and the stranger, we cannot say we are biblical or Christian voters. It's really that simple.

You will not hear me, over these next four months, tell you who to vote for. You won't hear me tell who who I'm voting for. But I will call us to make a difference in this election cycle. Make a difference by examining our own hearts and our own values. Make a difference by practicing civil discourse and calling for it wherever we are. Respecting those whose beliefs are different. Asking tough questions but without name-calling and put-downs. Giving people the benefit of the doubt, acknowledging that many of us want the same thing for our world, even though we disagree - sometimes vehemently - on strategy.

I love the fact that this church embraces political diversity. I am acquainted with two members of this church, who met in this church, who are now close friends. One is a liberal Democrat, and one is a Republican, and they have agreed not to talk politics but they've also agreed to love each other. They are modeling the kind of maturity we wish we could see in our leaders.

But you know, there are a few leaders who model it as well. They don't tend to make the news, but we should recognize integrity where we see it, and shine a light on it.

This spring, Vice President Joe Biden and former Speaker of the House John Boehner both received honors at the University of Notre Dame. They were awarded the school's highest honor, a medal given for outstanding service to church and society. They were chosen because they "exemplify an alternative to the acrimonious nature of today's politics. Despite their different political agendas, they remained friends, sought compromise and worked to create a more unified nation." (Or tried to.)

Biden has warned his fellow Democrats against demonizing the Republicans. He credits his faith for helping instill in him this desire to collaborate with others. "I believe that everything is personal and everyone - even those with whom we disagree - should be treated with dignity." "My faith has reinforced the teaching that you can always challenge another person's judgment, but you can never moralize and challenge their motives."

During his time as House Speaker, Boehner tried to work in a bipartisan way, most notably on deficit reduction and immigration reform. Five years ago, Boehner and President Obama came close to reaching a "Grand Bargain" that would have cut nearly 4 trillion in the federal deficit, only to have the deal fall apart at the last minute.

Like Biden, Boehner says that his faith inspired him to go beyond partisanship to work for the common good.

They each praised the other at the ceremony at Notre Dame. Though from different parties, they each trusted that the other one had the country's best interests in mind at all times. They believed in compromise and civility, and they were grounded and given foundation in their faith. They are both Christians and citizens. And we need more people with that kind of character, not just in Washington but throughout our country.

...

Now fill the world with music, love and pride.”

Do you know what first motivated Miranda to write this musical? It was when he learned that Alexander Hamilton was an immigrant from a Caribbean island. Miranda’s own father was an immigrant from a Caribbean island. Both of them came to this country seeking education and a better life.

Strangers. Widows. Orphans. New York city public school students. The vulnerable. The poor. This is our country and this is its promise.

One of the songs from “Hamilton” contains this lyric, “Look around, look around, at how lucky we are to be alive right now.” It’s sung beautifully, and it’s so positive, so upbeat, that it catches me off guard when I listen to it. For are we? I don’t think most of us feel very lucky. Despite our affluence, despite so many modern advances, I don’t think we feel lucky to be alive in the time of Isis, alive in the time of environmental disasters.

Yet we are people of God. THIS is the day God has made. It is full of promise. And we are called to embrace it, and to embrace our responsibility as people of God to speak up for what matters most, as citizens and as Christians. We have a responsibility to use our lives to count for something, to care for this world that little Nora and all our children are inheriting.