

Pentecost 21, Proper 23
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Politics and the Gospel

During the month of October, preaching will cover four aspects of stewardship. Last week we spoke of the stewardship of creation. Today we talk about the stewardship of our civic and political action. Successive Sundays will focus on stewardship of ourselves in community, and stewardship of our earthly resources.

In a recent conversation with a family member who is more conservatively minded than I, I told him about the sermon from two weeks ago. I suggested to him what I did to you all, that the story we tell determines the eye with which we see, and the hand and foot with which we act and move. I included the part about not putting a stumbling block before "these little ones," and how I believed that this refers to marginalized people. He took me to task on that interpretation. He studies the Bible diligently. His Bachelor's degree is in biblical literature, and he just didn't see it that way. For him, the "little ones" were people not as mature in the faith, who, as St. Paul teaches elsewhere, could be offended by a stronger believer's freedom—and that we should care about that (and we should.)

His biggest critique, however is what he saw as bending Jesus' teaching to support a political position. When you talk about the marginalized, you bring up politics. He believes that we cannot (and therefore should not try) to bend Jesus to serve our personal political aspirations. I agree with him wholeheartedly. Jesus critiques politics, not the other way around, but that leaves us all in something of a quandary. What constitutes politics? How does one determine if a given topic is political or not? Who does the selecting?

Well, I opt for the easy way out of that one. In spite of what the Ecuadorian government required of the mission my parents served with, and to which the mission hierarchy had agreed in order to enter the country and do their work, that is, that the mission remain a-political in its work, I say there is nothing that is not political. Whenever and wherever human action engages with dynamics of power and resources, certain people take control of the situation and manage it. There we go—politics. Everything has a political aspect to it.

If everything has a political side to it, then the Bible is a book with political implications as well. How do we read the Bible without bending Jesus to our politics? We need to read it as completely as we can. We need to hear the story told, we need to hear the

wisdom taught, and we need to hear the challenge to action. That action will have political implications. There just isn't any getting around it.

Today we read about money. We hear about a well-heeled member of the community who wants to live well. He comes to Jesus for instruction, but he gets off to a rocky start. "Good teacher," he says—and Jesus says, "No one is good but God alone." Chastened but not bowed, he pushes on. Something deeper is bothering him. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Wow, how can Jesus not take the bait here? "What do you read in the Law?" asks Jesus. The man gives a short summary. Jesus says, "Do this and you shall live." (That was the prevailing wisdom of the day: *Keep the law and you're in a good place*. But somehow, it's not convincing.) "I have, since my youth," says the man, but he continues to stand there, implying he suspects there is something more. Jesus looks on him with compassion. *Wisdom and compassion, the two great virtues, one looks to heaven for inspiration, the other looks around for community*. They have spoken of the wisdom thing. Jesus brings in the compassion thing. "Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and come, follow me." In one of the saddest incidents in Jesus' ministry, the man walks away, because he has many things. The wisdom led to compassion, and he just wasn't ready to go there.

It's doubly sad, because his actions have political ramifications. A long time ago I read a translation of a letter written to the Roman Emperor by one of his officials. The letter tried to justify violence against Christians. The Christians, the letter said, are feeding the poor and taking care of the sick feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, things everyone expected the Roman government to do and they weren't, making them look bad. Clearly, being compassionate had political implications as well as moral and legal ones. Being godly involves people and resources. There is a political price for compassion.

Meanwhile, the disciples are watching all of this, rather shocked. Is Jesus anti-money? Is money NOT a sign of God's blessing? How about us who have a nest egg hidden away? Jesus responds with a startling analogy. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, I know there are stories of narrow rocky passes in mountains and other explanations for this analogy, but I think it says what it says. Getting into the kingdom requires something that you cannot just "do," and be done with it. It requires a kind of conversion, a quantum leap, a letting go. It's given, not accomplished, something surrendered to rather than taken up. The Greek word is "metanoia," a bigger way of knowing. It happens when we somehow slip through an unseen hole in the boxes we live in and see the world anew from a higher, broader, deeper plane. It's when wisdom leads to compassion.

So, what does this have to do with politics? Thomas Jefferson wrote that the key to a successful democracy was education. He knew that the masses can be short-sighted, anxious and foolish. An unscrupulous candidate for election can pander to the anxiety of the people and quickly be elected. That kind of official is not in office because of what they will do to lead the people into a better place. As long as they make people feel like the focus of their anxiety is being addressed, the person in power can (and will) do what they want. They can line their own pockets, favor friends and relatives, even break the law, and people will be OK with it, as long as they make the people feel like their anxiety is being resolved. Another candidate, playing to other anxieties in the people, will set up an alternative universe. Because the issue is anxiety rather than clear-eyed policy in which a compromise might be found, they will always launch into an existential struggle for total control. This is why I think today's political arena is so divided. It is driven by collective anxiety, and not wisdom and compassion.

For Jefferson, education was the key, and it is an enormously important thing, but in the Jesus way, it is not the only thing. Wisdom (from above,) and compassion (from around you,) are the twin pillars of Jesus' way. For those great virtues to rise to the forefront, there must be conversion, a metanoia, a larger way of seeing things.

Our problem, I fear, is that we have many possessions. Keeping our property values up, keeping our political advantage, keeping our investment accounts safe, keeping our social clout, protecting our culture's ethnocentric definition of the good life (which is our life,) maintaining the status quo that has served us so well, these things tie us down and lock us in our little boxes. They define our politics, and dictate our votes. When our possessions possess us rather than we possessing them, they become the focus of an inordinate amount of anxiety.

Jesus defines another way. The Christian is called upon to be civically and politically involved, not from the ego, but from the spirit. If it feels like forcing a camel through the eye of a needle, you haven't gotten it yet. Let go of the way your possessions possess you. Dare to be dangerously generous. Open yourself to the quantum leap, the letting go, the receiving. Let yourself slip through the unforeseen hole in your box, to see the world in a new way from the vantage point of a higher plane. Then, educate yourself about the candidates and go vote.

Don't worry. Jesus promises you really won't lose anything important, and you'll gain everything that really is.