

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost and Reformation Sunday- October 31, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 72:1-7 & Deuteronomy 16:18-20

HOW WILL WE VOTE?

In 1957 our denomination, the United Church of Christ, was formed through a merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Church. Our congregation, the Haslett Community Church, was founded in 1954-55 and belonged originally to the Congregational Christian Church. Today, I'd like to pick up on an element of our Congregationalist heritage that I hadn't heard about until recently. It's the tradition of an Election Day sermon.

In the 18th century, it was common for Congregational churches to hold special worship services on Election Day itself. According to United Church of Christ historian, Barbara Brown Zikmund, the day would begin with cannon fire at the town square and a procession of government officials from the seat of government to a nearby church. There the appointed pastor would preach for several hours (I repeat, for several *hours*) both to elected officials and to voting citizens on their spiritual and moral duties in the political realm.

Since there are no working cannon at the Meridian Township or State Capitol offices, and since none of our elected officials at either place likely would agree to process all the way to this church, and since few, if any, of us would come to a worship service on a Tuesday morning, and since even fewer of us would tolerate a sermon several hours long on any subject even on a Sunday, I don't propose to follow our Congregationalist ancestors in every aspect of their Election Day traditions. I do, however, want to reflect with you in the spirit of this heritage that they've passed on to us.

This doesn't mean that I'll presume to tell you what to mark on your ballot this coming Tuesday as some ministers and church leaders have been and still are wont to do. But it does mean that like those 18th century Congregationalist preachers I'll offer thoughts on the difference that being a Christian makes to the way we think and act politically. All of us can then pray for further guidance in deciding how truthful these thoughts are and how they can best apply to our voting this Tuesday and in elections to come.

Many books, most of them hundreds of pages long, have been written on this question of the political responsibilities of Christians. For our time today, though, and in the interest of keeping this sermon under several hours long, I'll limit our focus to two main areas, both of which I've highlighted before in preaching about Christian wisdom for citizenship. The first will be the primary goal that we have as Christians in our political thinking and acting. The second will be the manner in which we pursue that goal.

Our primary goal is justice. The Bible, in both Testaments, makes clear that this is the proper and foremost aim of government, its officials, and the citizens who interact with them. Today's Scripture from the book of Deuteronomy gives a vivid example. "You shall appoint judges and officials . . . and they shall render just decisions for the people. You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes . . . Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you."

In the Bible's broadest and deepest sense, pursuing justice means striving after God's *shalom*, working towards the mutually free, fair, vibrant, and loving harmony of all with all that is God's intent for creation. Political life is one of the key arenas in which this pursuit is carried out.

To give a more specific idea about what it means to seek justice in the political realm, the Bible stresses different forms of *injustice* that government is called to address. St. Paul, for example, in Romans 13 speaks of the injustice that's done when people commit crime. In verse 4, he says that governing authorities are God's servants to "execute wrath on the wrongdoer." According to Scripture, government rightly pursues justice by establishing just laws and by justly prosecuting, convicting, and punishing those who break them.

Today's reading from Psalm 72 highlights two other major forms of injustice government is meant to remedy. When Psalm 72 was written, Israel was ruled by a monarchy. So the psalmist prays in verse 2: "May (the king) judge your people with righteousness (O Lord) and your poor with justice." The psalmist knows that Israel's kings often made unjust laws. The nation's prophets frequently criticized them for being biased against the poor and in favor of the rich.

The prophet, Isaiah, for instance, in his chapter 10, verse 2 says, "Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless" (New International Version). The psalmist pleads for the judgments encoded in the king's laws to be righteous, for them to insure justice for everyone.

Psalm 72, verse 4, then goes on to say, "May (the king) defend the cause of the poor." With this prayer, the psalmist spotlights another form of injustice that frequently plagued Israel. Even when laws were just they often were unjustly administered. Officials were bought off with bribes or other inducements despite Deuteronomy's loud warning against this. The legitimate claims of the poor and needy were blatantly violated or simply ignored by government officials, again in favor of the wealthy.

These passages from Paul and the psalmist illustrate Scripture's firm teaching that government's prime goal is justice for everyone. Justice only for some is in fact a contradiction in terms since justice *means* that *everyone* gets the treatment due to them as equally beloved children of God. The Bible further emphasizes that in practice this means we must also share God's special concern for those who often have been, or are most vulnerable to being, treated unjustly. The impoverished, the prisoner, the disabled, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the wage laborer are the ones Scripture mentions most often in this regard as those to whom God's heart especially goes out. Here are two of many examples:

In Psalm 146, the God who made all things is identified as the One "who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry . . . (who) sets the prisoners free; (who) opens the eyes of the blind . . . lifts up those who are bowed down . . . watches over the strangers (and) upholds the orphan and . . . widow" (v. 4-9).

In Malachi, chapter 3, the Lord of hosts comes in just judgment against "those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, (who oppress) the widow and the orphan . . . (and) who thrust aside the stranger" (verse 5).

To pursue justice for everyone as the primary goal of our political life with special concern for those who have been, or are most vulnerable to being, treated unjustly is among the very best contributions we can make to it as Christians. It's one that I think is badly needed in our time because it seems more common now to hold that the main political responsibility of each person is to seek his or her own *self-interest*. In that view, politics is seen as a competitive game or fight in which the victor gets the spoils. On that basis, campaigns for office or for ballot measures as well as the day-to-day course of political affairs typically are conceived, carried out, and reported on as races or battles with triumphant winners and vanquished losers rather than as common and cooperative ventures conducted in solidarity with everyone so that we can do our best together to seek justice for all.

If envisioning political campaigns and the daily course of political life as common and cooperative ventures conducted in solidarity with everyone so that we can do our best together to seek justice for all seems hopelessly naïve and idealistic it only goes to show how faint the Biblical call to strive for God's *shalom* has become to us, even in a country where the majority of us think of ourselves as Christians. To give up on that call, however, is to give up on God's vision of the way things are meant to be, and, as Christians, we can't do that.

So we *keep* justice for everyone as *the* foremost aim of all our political thought and action. We keep encouraging our government officials and fellow citizens to join us, above all, in working towards that goal. But *how* or in what manner do we do this? We seek justice with humility and wisdom, not with pride or presumption.

It takes a heap of humility to keep recognizing that in God's eyes everyone else's well-being really is as important as my own. It takes a mountain of wisdom to stay mindful of how complicated and difficult many of the issues of justice are and of how many legitimate and complementary concerns and values

have to be sifted through in trying to achieve it- concerns for example, for freedom, equality, need, merit, individual responsibility and a level playing field on which to exercise it.

To pursue justice for everyone both humbly and wisely we therefore have to resist the temptation in dealing with these thorny and often uncertain issues to pretend that we know things that we don't know or that we even can't know. We have to keep from oversimplifying things by seeing them always in black and white, but never in shades of gray.

To resist these temptations, we instead have to remain honest and straightforward about how we've come to hold the beliefs that we do about which deeds will best serve justice. We stay open to listening to and learning from others in the hope of always deepening our own understanding and practice. Aware of the limitations of our own information, intelligence, and righteousness, we don't reflexively oppose those who may differ from or disagree with us. We don't demonize them as godless, evil, cowardly, and stupid while idolizing ourselves as godly, good, courageous, and smart.

Rather, we do our best to find common ground with others, assuming the integrity of their motives. We work to understand their ideas as fully as they do and in their strongest form. We take care to represent those ideas as fairly as we can to others, striving to appreciate any truth in them that we tend to miss, downplay, or ignore. In short, we treat those who differ from or disagree with us as we would like to be treated. We remember that Jesus has a golden rule about that. We remember that following this rule will always dramatically improve both the tone and the substance of our nation's and of any nation's political life.

When it comes to those who do pursue their own selfish advantage and turn away from any obligation to seek justice for all, we, as Christians, oppose them outright. We oppose them openly and for the long haul, but . . . *without self-righteousness, anxiety, or fear*. We can do this because our faith is in God. Our faith is that the ultimate outcome of the struggle for justice is in God's hands, not ours.

This fact is crucial because it's so often our fear that leads to the worst in our political life. Forgetful of or in denial of God's providential love for all, we become nervous and afraid, thinking that the future is totally up to us. Anxious that everything is in our hands and that no one cares about us as much as we do we easily get caught up in the struggle for power and control. Desperate to be in control, we start to fear anyone or anything that seems to threaten the power that we feel *we* must have. And what won't we do in our struggle for power?

First, we'll give up our pursuit of justice for all because we figure now that every person, family, group, and nation has to be out for itself. We'll push our own particular self-interest since we think we've got to gain every advantage we can. We won't hesitate to misrepresent, vilify, or mock those who differ from, disagree, or oppose us if we think it will help us to gain power over them. If we think they're out to hurt us directly, we'll try to attack, maim, and destroy them, even in advance, rather than seek understanding and reconciliation with them.

But basic to our faith as Christians is our conviction that God's providential love for everyone ultimately is in charge. As Psalm 97 celebrates, "The Lord is King." God is "most high over all the earth . . . (therefore) the earth (can) rejoice (and) . . . be glad." People everywhere, no matter what their political affiliation, nationality, religion, or lack thereof can rejoice and be glad because *God rules*.

Amidst our world's many ambiguities and uncertainties, differences and disagreements, amid all of our sins and failures towards each other and the fear that this stirs in us, we remember that *God still reigns*. God still is at work to bring about good from evil and justice from injustice. God still is active, able, and willing to bring about God's *shalom* amidst the many forces and choices that ignore, resist, and oppose God- choices that we all still make and forces in which all of us still are caught up.

Trusting in God's providential love for everyone, we can let go of our fear- our fear (imagine this!) even of those who belong to a different political party or orientation. We can relax in the fact that we're not and don't have to be in God's place. We're free instead to be brothers and sisters in God's family, spiritual kin who are mutually respectful, caring, and searching in our striving for justice, but free from any anxious pretense, arrogance, or self-righteousness in the way that we seek it since we know the future is in God's hands.

“Your Kingdom come, O Lord, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the End, our faith is that it will, and in the meantime, we join in loving solidarity with all God’s people to live God’s *shalom* as fully as we can right now. We serve God’s reign *today* as we pursue justice for all as humbly and wisely as we can. That’s the spirit we’re called to carry with us into the voting booth this Tuesday and in every election to come. That’s the way that we vote as Christians. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

I lift up one last prayer request for us today.

You may recall that the last several years on the Sunday before or after All Saints’ Day, during our Prayers of the People time I’ve invited us to remember specifically those members and friends of our church who’ve died in the past 12 months or others for whom we’ve had funerals or memorial services. With tomorrow being All Saints’ Day, I invite us this morning to especially remember Betty Wittick, Doreen Western, Glora Mae Kenyon, Ernie Foote, Beverly Decker, Shirley Durr, Jeffery Powis, Marion Fuller, Betty Rogers, and Mary Anne Humphrey.

As we’ve also done in the past, let this be a time, too, to remember and give thanks for *any* of our loved ones who’ve died in this past year or before. Let’s begin our silent prayer with remembrance before God both of our church’s members and friends deceased in this past year *and* with remembrance of any who have been dear to us, but who no longer are with us in this life. Let’s then bring all of our other joys and concerns, too, both those already named aloud and those that we each have in our hearts. We begin our prayer in silence . . .

God of our living and our dying, we thank You for all the gifts of this life. We thank You for Your call to live in Your shalom, in the free, fair, vibrant, and loving harmony of all with all that is Your desire for us. We thank You for the responsibility You give us to share Your gifts justly with each other- with our blood kin, with our family of faith that is Your church, with our local communities in this area, and with Your children all across the earth with whom You connect us through Your global church and Your family of creation.

Today, Lord, we especially remember and give You thanks for all those who have been dear to us in this life, but who have joined You now in Your life to come. We have entrusted them to Your merciful care, grateful for the love they shared with us here and thankful, above all, that Your love embraces them now through all eternity. We praise You for the promise we have in You that one day by Your grace we’ll join with them in the blessed company of the saints in light.

We rejoice and give thanks for all of Your saints of every time and place, both those from the past and those with us now. Apostles, prophets, martyrs, humble believers of every race and tribe and clan who have placed their trust in You, whose example opens our eyes to Your truth and inspires our hearts with Your love. We celebrate their lives dedicated to Your service.

Help us always to be more like them. Help us to live in a way that truly draws others to You, that shines Your light upon them because Your light shines in us. Give us the strength to serve You always in every matter great and small, to love You not only with our words but with our deeds, to risk ourselves in faithful acts of loving justice for all Your creatures, knowing that we can always count on You for everything that really matters. We pray this in Jesus’ name and we pray again as he has taught us, saying together, “Our Father, . . . “ Amen.