

Sermon Text for November 1, 2020

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Proverbs 23:1-3, Romans 13: 1-7

“Would Jesus vote?”

How are you doing family? I really haven't asked you that lately and I can see some of you now face to face so it is good to ask and get an answer. They say there are two things you don't talk about when you are in a family setting like Thanksgiving or Christmas, you know those times that you gather together after a long time apart. Religion and politics. Today we are going to look at our faith and how that faith ought to impact and shape the way in which we view politics and the way in which we vote and act.

Our two Scriptures for today address power and politics and guide us in our faith and in our approach to how do we interact with civil society. What you are not going to hear today is who should you vote for. As I always do, I lay out what I understand Scripture to say and then I basically hand it off to you and say: now you go do something with it and take a stance that you can back up with Scripture. So today the title of the sermon is: Would Jesus vote? First, we need to be sure that we understand that it is purely a hypothetical question because Jesus never had the opportunity to vote because there was no voting in the Roman Empire. Caesar wasn't elected by the people. It would be as if we asked any woman before 1920 – who did you vote for? They didn't, there was no vote for women before 1920 in this country.

Jesus also said my kingdom is not of this world, but that doesn't diminish the impact that he had upon the world and upon people. When we talk about politics, what are we talking about? Politics is the process of making policies which impact people. Jesus cared for people, he laid out a vision that was one where every single person would know their value in God's eyes, and that value was indisputable. When Jesus healed, he was involved in politics. When Jesus taught, he was involved in politics, when Jesus died on the cross as a Roman prisoner, when Jesus was federally executed, he was involved in politics. Because what he did affected people, which is really at the core of politics. How we decide our politics affects policies which affect people. And Jesus loved people, which made him involved in politics.

So, I'm going to answer that question even before we get to the second Scripture, to the question, would Jesus vote, we can say with complete confidence, yes. As he encouraged, actually commanded people to pay taxes, so he would do the same in regards to voting. Today, from our Scripture, we are going to once again find ourselves in a Presbyterian three point

sermon that addresses the Scriptures that we have: First of all, we will see that whoever is in political power is called to bring about God's purposes. Secondly, the role of government is to encourage the good in society, and thirdly, order is established and desired by God. Let's read.

READ SCRIPTURE

I have lived a life where for some reason or another I have found myself in the presence of very, very powerful political figures in history. Over my ministry and in my role as pastor I have had the chance to meet and have an audience with Mary Macaleese, who was President of Ireland at that time. In that same setting I had an opportunity to meet and speak with Mikael Gorbachev, you've heard of him. I had a chance to sit in on a meeting with then president of Czechoslovakia, Vatslav Havel, and that same summer, 1992, I had a chance to have dinner with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Patriarch Alexy of Russia. In my ministry in Italy I had a chance to meet and speak with then Cardinal Ratzinger who later became Pope Benedict the 16th. More recently I had a chance to meet then governor of California Arnold Schwarzeneger.

Even as I list these people off I feel the danger of pride and name dropping that comes with mingling and rubbing elbows with people who are in positions to make enormous differences for people, both good and bad. The Presbyterian Church as a denomination has also played very fundamental roles in political power. The chaplain to the United States Senate, the last 3 of the 4 have been Presbyterians. The most frequent chaplain to the House of Representatives has been Presbyterians. We have not shied away from being involved in a political way because we know that politics affects people and people are our clients, Jesus loves people and politics has an impact on people.

But Proverbs tells us to beware of ruler's delicacies because they are deceptive food. There is something about being around people of power that can be intoxicating. That is why we have the quote from John Dallery who stated that power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. So how do we maneuver our faith, our devotion and our complete servanthood to Jesus Christ, and yet at the same time be involved in ways that we can affect policy so that people are cared for, so that people are the primary responsibility of our political institutions as they are of our faith community?

Reinhold Neibuhr an ethicist who came out of Nazi Germany said that we should one hundred percent be involved in the political landscape of this country, but none of us should ever make the mistake of thinking that any of the political parties fully represent the kingdom of God. If someone were to ask us if we were either Democrat or a Republican our answer should be: on which issues? Because no party is the Christian party, no party can pretend to have the blessing

of God while the other party has the cursing of God. In fact, we have to start with the premise that each party believes that they are each working for the good of the country, but the good of the country we arrive at in a different way. I know, for those of you who are dripping with cynicism this election season, if you believe that the other political party does not have the good of the country in mind, even if their platforms are not yours, then you are not being fair.

At this stage we have to make sure that our faith is what is guiding our approach to politics and not the other way around, that our politics is guiding our faith. That is a real danger. You know, there are three types of Christians in how they interact with politics. There is that Christian which totally disengages and says heaven is all that matter to me, what happens here on this earth has no bearing on my relationship with God so I am not even going to vote, I'm going to totally disengage. Then there is the other extreme that says politics is all that really matters. It is how someone who doesn't know me will define me because of my political activism. What I believe and how I act is going to be guided by my desire to be so extremely involved. The danger there is that you have made politics an idol, it has taken over your life and you are not able to differentiate between what your faith is guiding you to do and what your political stances have painted you into a corner to say and believe.

Then there is the one who is engaged but allows their faith to be the guiding factor in their decision making. You are able to interact with people with different viewpoints because you give people the benefit of the doubt. Your approach is that of kindness and gentleness, but you believe strongly and yet it does not control you, it does not put you in a position where outsiders would say well if they say they are Christian and that is how they act and how they interact then I want nothing to do with them. This is where we ought to be.

Let's get to Romans because Paul lays out three political truths that we have to cover. Paul states very clearly that God can use anyone to bring about God's purposes. This has been a problematic verse for me in many ways. Can God use anyone? Really? Can God use Trump and can God use Biden? Martin Luther stated about this verse: "Christians should not refuse, under the pretext of religion, to obey men, especially evil ones." I guess that is why I'm not a Lutheran. John Calvin said about this verse: "Tyrannies, and unjust exercise of power, as they are full of disorder, are not an ordained government." So where do we stand? Surely our founding fathers were much more Calvinistic in their approach in the Revolution. They fought against the government that was over them, and for the most part we applaud that. So there is not a blanket acceptance of this verse by any of us gathered here today, unless we think the Revolution was a mistake and we should still be under British rule.

Our history as Christians and governing is problematic. Germany under Nazi power was supported by the German Church, the German Nationalist Church which used this Scripture repeatedly. Apartheid in South Africa used this verse repeatedly, they were Presbyterians by the way. In Rwanda the genocide which took place there between Hutu and Tutsi took place in a country that declares itself to be 94% Christian.

So Paul says here in the midst of the Roman Empire who had Nero who made it his goal to wipe out the Christians, that God is able to use all people for God's purposes, no matter who we put in power. But to what extent. Ought we not elect those who at least we understand to be walking closer to the kingdom of God with their policies and their approach to people, since God and we ought to love people? You'd think you would want an ally in office, and not someone who was working against the kingdom of God.

The second thing we ought to keep in mind which Paul tells us is that the primary responsibility of the government is to bring about good. Isn't that interesting. It doesn't say to make people disciples of Jesus Christ, but it says to bring about a civic good. Which person do we believe will bring about the good that we find in Scripture, where people are the most important aspect of who we are. Where our command to love God is equaled only with the command to love our neighbor. This is how good is brought about through policies and through politics.

So we have seen that God is able to work through every person who is in power, and secondly that those in power are the responsibility to bring about civic good. Lastly, we find this not only in Romans, but also in I Corinthians 14:33, the role of the government is to bring about order. Anarchy is not a viable Christian stance or position. Authorities exist to bring about order. Individuals ought to look for opportunities to sow order. Institutions ought to bring about order. Paul is speaking out against revolt and revolution in the midst of a time when there were militant Jewish groups who were looking to overthrow Rome by force. Paul says, this is not the way. He tells us today that good trouble is able to be found but not in violence. Never in violence and never in situations that lead to disorder which inevitably leads to violence. Order is established by God, because chaos and disorder are God's enemies.

Now what? Four years ago that was the title of my sermon the Sunday after the election. I said now we move forward as a church family unified in our beliefs that God can and does use anyone in power, knowing and trusting that the role of the government is always to bring about good, also knowing that order is God's desire, for he came to bring about peace. This house is big enough to fit everyone in it from every walk of life, politically and otherwise. At times we

are called to give up our individualism which leads us away from the common good as we seek out our own good. Politics matters, you need to be engaged, but don't be a jerk.

But our involvement with people and loving people should not be limited to a single vote. Just like our faith is not relegated to a single hour on Sunday and that is our only interaction with God and with our faith. It is a lifelong commitment. Next week we will gather just like we did this week. However this thing ends, Jesus remains King, Jesus remains in control. Amen.