

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Andrew K. Barnett
Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:15-20
Sunday, September 6, 2020



How to Be Christian in an Election

Lord, help us to seek the truth, come whence it may, cost what it will. Amen.

I'd like to talk to you about being Christian in an election. More broadly, this is about following Jesus as we faithfully engage the world, in love. But it hits close to home in election season, because in the next two months, we're about to see a lot of religious authorities align themselves with the powers and principalities of the world. We'll see collars, pulpits, and suits telling us how to vote, what to think, and where to get our news. I don't know about you, but I am not looking for cable news with some Biblical commentary. I have legitimately been wondering how to be Christian in an election.

We have at least two bad options before us: Staying out of it completely, and taking hyper-partisan positions. The first option is to do nothing and just put on a good Sunday show. Sadly, this is the option the Episcopal Church has taken more often than we'd like to admit, especially during slavery, when we did not take a public position, or during Civil Rights, when, for example, signing the Ministers' Manifesto would affect your budget and staff in material ways.

Some people might take their money and leave, and, in fact they did after All Saints' signed it.

This first bad option says, "Don't bring politics into church. This is a place to talk only of religious things. Folks will draw their own conclusions. Stay out of it." But is silence ever the safe option?

A second bad option is to take the road of partisan religion, and that is to campaign for a candidate or party: to generate rage, fear, and manufactured moral righteousness that nobody even pretends to keep, to build media empires, megachurches, billion-dollar universities, and to clog the airwaves with issues the Bible does not address—specifically abortion and consensual, loving gay relationships—while dodging the issues we find in the actual Bible.

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We can neither speak nor act meaningfully toward food for the hungry, care for the sick, welcome for the immigrant stranger, just mercy for the accused, stewardship of creation, or a host of Gospel values without asking questions of policy, influence, and resource- the literal definition of politics.

Jesus of Nazareth, the one we meet in the Gospels, cares about these issues. He did not get crucified for being nice. He was not promoted for his religious views, absent a social context he proclaimed God's kingdom and he changed the local particulars of the neighborhood. Can we reflect faithfully on these political questions, without strident partisanship?

Here I'm putting my finger on a nerve that much of mainline protestant Christianity feels. It is dangerous to reflect with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, especially when much of the country thinks Christianity is defined by judgment, hypocrisy, and partisanship.

But surely people of faith have a role to play in conducting the public business with honesty and respect.

Today, we observe our nation at war with itself. Vile epithets abound. Invective, public shaming and disdain now mark our public life. Truth is trashed, bald-faced lies go unanswered by Christian leaders, officials thought to be noble look at their shoes, acquiescing in the most egregious misconduct, behavior that would shock our forebears of all political stripes.

Hate marched by torchlight in Charlottesville and many would not call its name. Explicit racism seeps from the halls of power, while moral clarity is in short supply. Babies are wrenched from their mothers' arms, families separated, children in cages, and such meanness has been embraced as necessary, even contrived to teach cruel lessons to those seeking new hope in this land.

The flames of violence are fanned for political benefit, and, perhaps most ominously, the animus that pervades the public square corrodes the public conversation. Government that is by, of, and for the people requires mutual trust and respect, so we can reconcile differences and arrive at consensus in service of the common good.

Today's vile speech and conduct blinds us to the tragic consequences of a mean-spirited ineptitude: People are dying. This is not normal, and something is wrong.

We face not a Republican problem nor a Democratic problem; but, rather, an American problem that begs the concern of us all. Is there a middle way between those two bad options: saying nothing and getting hyper-partisan? I propose a Christian's response to what ails us, one that calls us to ageless values, and bridges the chasm between what is and what could yet be.

It is, as St. Francis said, to preach the Gospel at all times, when necessary, using specific words: to proclaim Christ's Gospel of Love without fear, offering Gospel prescriptions for just and moral conduct in the community, including its public square.

If you only hear one thing today, this is it: We should not stay silent in the face of wrong-doing. We should not wear the cloak of partisan religion. Rather, let's faithfully engage the world, in love.

It is not partisan to preach virtue, integrity, justice, and kindness. No, it comes from the Good Book. It is not partisan to preach the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." No, this is the Gospel. It is not partisan to preach the protection of God's Creation. No, it is the command of the Scriptures. It is not partisan to weep and protest when people are treated like beasts, when lies replace truth, or when crowds chant shameful words from our worst history.

The Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth calls us to take a stand. As Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton demands, "If you stand for nothing Burr, what'll you fall for?" Right now, people are hungry for Gospel good news. The kind of good news that calls for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The kind of good news that says that when you love your neighbor as yourself, you are truly fulfilling the law, because love does no wrong to a neighbor,

You can take that truth to the bank, and turn it in for a mortgage and build a house on it, and plan the neighborhood around that, and build your community and schools on that premise, and set your nation on that idea, and write your laws around the concept, and love can be your source, your foundation.

Indeed, love is the fulfillment of the law because love does no wrong to the neighbor. Paul writes this beautifully in Romans. Consider that our constitution takes up just a few dozen pages, yet reams of laws have been written around its concepts. Now imagine an even shorter, more powerful, more concise constitution, that becomes the foundation of all laws everywhere.

When the lawyer asks Jesus which law is most important, what does he say? “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and all your strength. And the second commandment is like unto it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On this hangs all the law and all the prophets.”

So as we seek to faithfully engage the world now, literally, to be a Christian in an election, What are we to do? Let love be our first principle: love will ground us and guide us. Second, let’s all vote. No matter who we’re planning to vote for, let’s all vote our conscience, and do everything we can to empower our family, friends, and neighbors to vote. Third, let’s hold ourselves and our government to the standard that love fulfills the law, and nothing else does. Let’s speak the truth, contest lies, and call for good leadership. Fourth, let’s ground ourselves in daily scripture study and prayer so we remember what those Gospel values really are.

Finally, let this community be one of love. Because when this election is over, we are going to have some very happy people, some very angry people, and a good number of disillusioned people. Whether we have a President Biden or a President Trump, whatever happens in down-ballot races, some of us are going to be thrilled while others are going to be convinced that we should all move to Canada because the fill-in-the-blank party is going to destroy America.

Our Gospel this morning is all about reconciliation, which is a central Christian virtue. What makes us Christian is not whether we fight or disagree or wound each other, but how we go about repairing those breaches.

Let it be said of us that we had something to say, and we said it in love. But let it also be said of us that we had some things to understand and we listened in love too.

I have said these things to you in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.