

Luke 14:1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely.

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

Signs of the Times - God's Politics - August 28, 2022

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Let me begin today by reading a few quotes about the nature of politics:

Mark Twain —, Suppose you were an idiot, and suppose you were a member of Congress; but I repeat myself.

P. J. O'Rourke — The Democrats are the party that says government will make you smarter, taller, richer, and remove the crabgrass on your lawn. The Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work and then they get elected and prove it.

Ernest Benn — Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies.

John F. Kennedy — Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future.

Ralph Nader — Turn on to politics, or politics will turn on you.

These people, whether they are humorists, activists, or politicians themselves all present a rather jaded view of politics and politicians. And can you blame them? Right now in our nation, we are facing an almost unparalleled crisis of polarization. Trust in government, courts, and other institutions are at record lows. Long-time pillars of American Society such as the Boy Scouts and Churches are regarded with deep suspicion. It is fascinating that the human institutions that command the most respect are the Armed Forces. They are perceived as being neutral and honest. Trust is evaporating so it perhaps is little wonder that some people are putting their faith in certain individuals who promise to “drain the swamp” or can summon Jesus from heaven to fix all our problems.

All societal institutions, be they Governments, Churches, Non-profits and Corporations, are all composed of human beings. The problem with human beings is, of course, we are inherently fallible. We make mistakes, intentionally and unintentionally. That is the essence of the Bible. In chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis, God creates a wonderful world and puts humans in charge of it. In chapter 3, Adam and Eve break the only rule God gave them. In chapter 4, their son Cain kills his brother Abel and things spiral downward from there. The Bible is essentially a collection of stories of flawed human beings living life both honestly and dishonestly. Did you know that Moses, the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt and carried the Ten Commandments down from Mt. Sinai — Moses was a

murderer. David, the most beloved King of Israel, ordered a man to be sent to the front lines of battle to be killed so he could have the soldier's wife. In the New Testament, Peter, Jesus' lead disciple, denied him at his trial and crucifixion. Paul, the greatest evangelist of Christianity, began his career persecuting and killing Christians. No wonder it took years for the early church to trust him.

Yet, if nothing else, the Bible gives us hope in the sense that all these men, despite their scandalous beginnings, were nonetheless used to God to spread the Word. In short, none of us is beyond redemption. So when I look at today's political war zone we call America, I have faith that if God can rehabilitate the immoral Moses, David, Peter, and Paul, God can do the same for us.

You may ask what today's story about Jesus encouraging us to take the path of humility in our relationships has to do with politics. The answer, of course, is everything. God's Politics, like everything else God touches, is not the way of human beings. Nonetheless, it is our goal, the standard we strive for.

But before I show how Jesus' advice should serve as a guide for today's politicians, let's step back and ask why am I even discussing politics in the first place.

It is well known that the two subjects we should avoid talking about in the company of strangers is religion and politics. Strangers? What am I talking about? Even at family gatherings, religion and politics has ruined more Thanksgivings and Memorial Days that we could ever count. Therefore it seems that a pastor who talks about politics is treading on thin ice with regard to preaching about it. Just about whatever I say will be subject to misinterpretation and attack.

Yet in our Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, we are encouraged to be active in politics. We don't shy away. We get involved. As you know, I shared many times with you how involved Presbyterians were in the American Revolution and the founding of our nation. Over the years, we have never stopped making statements about the many issues facing society, rooting them in a Biblical perspective. Needless to say, many of the stands our denomination has taken over the years have been controversial, Some have had to be modified or even repudiated. We confess that God is constantly revealing the truth to us flawed human beings and we have and will continue to misunderstand God's word — praying that someday we'll get it right.

Jesus confronted the question of mixing religion and politics when he was asked about paying taxes to the Roman government. He said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's." In other words, we are also confronted with never-ending choices about choosing between Caesar and God. It is not an either/or proposition. It is decidedly both/and. Somehow, we must navigate the

sometimes conflicting choices between living life Caesar's (or society's) way and God's way. Few of us have the luxury or desire to cut ourselves off from wider society to live alone or in a closed community. As the church, therefore, it is our obligation to apply the truths of scripture to the problems facing the world today. To do otherwise would be to simply surrender to the dictates of Caesar and confine ourselves to proclaiming a sweet by-and-by which blindly ignores the disastrous situations in which our world finds itself.

In 1983 a statement by our General Assembly issued a document entitled "Reformed Faith and Politics." It explains that the contribution of our faith tradition to our nation's political discourse can be delineated in seven principles: (1) the separation of church and state and the high value attached to both; (2) the recognition of the continual struggle to reform the society through law for human good; (3) the need for voluntary associations of people covenanting together for the health of politics; (4) the utilization of broad traditions of human wisdom for political ethics; (5) the value of a system of social ethics that includes standards of justice and processes of application of justice to cases; (6) the need for political systems to be constitutionally regulated and under law; and (7) the need for checks and balances within political systems because of the reality of human sin.

Don't all seven of these principles sound relevant and necessary to insuring our society can function in an upright way that can insure equality for all persons? At the same time, isn't it easy to see how each of these principles are under attack right now?

The challenge facing the Church is not whether you are religious yourself or whether you believe the Church should even exist given its many flaws and failings. The question is that if you agree with these seven goals, what person or what group has the capacity and the standing to advocate for these principles? Can one person do it? Perhaps a "benevolent dictator" having only the people's interests at heart? Find me, if you please, an example of such a person in world history.

Who else might advocate for these ideas? The news media? Social media? The internet? There is little doubt that you can find news organizations and individuals who would strongly agree with these ideas. Likewise, you would find probably a greater number who reject them. The question, whether for those in agreement or not, is what are their underlying motivations for their support or rejection. Why are they for or against these ideas? The news business, like the social media business are both, well, businesses. Their ideas are bought and sold to those with whom they agree. MSNBC has a slew of listeners and it exists frankly because advertisers pay to have their messages reach those listeners. Fox News is absolutely no different — the ideas they advocate may be different from those

of MSNBC, but they also exist to make money for their owners. Who would have thought of the occupation of “social influencer” would employ so many people? Politicians are increasingly recruiting them to get their message across, and succeeding. People express their opinions, ideas, talents over various internet platforms and get paid for doing so. Yes, the business of giving opinions is indeed all about the money.

Therefore, for better or worse, God’s Politics must be supported, spread, and endorsed primarily by God’s Church — as disappointing as that sounds. Highly suspect, highly flawed, justifiably condemnable organized religion must stand up for God’s ideas.

What gives us the right? I mean, how dare we!

Friends, the only thing that provides some justification for the Church to stand up for God’s justice and God’s way of running the world is the Bible. Yes, the Bible. Whatever you may choose to think about it, the Bible is the closest human beings may come to capturing the essence of how God thinks. No person, no other human organization has anything like the Bible so rather than ignoring it, let’s instead embrace it — all of it, not just the parts we like — and use it to share God’s way of thinking about politics with the world.

Clearly, God’s Politics, the seven principles described above as well as every good and righteous political act must start in the hearts of the politicians themselves. And Jesus teaches that in the heart of every politician must reside humility. Jesus offers two guidelines for all those who hold office, Not just politicians, not just clergy people, not just CEOs, not just soldiers. All of us in positions of leadership over others.

First he said, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Friends, it is so easy to be captured by the trappings of power. Power, for many, is fun. Having it and the perks that go along with it are so so seductive, aren’t they? Money, fame, sex — just the plain thrill of granting or withholding favors from other people purely on a whim. Is it any wonder how so many elected leaders are held in contempt. Instinctively, we know many of them could not care less about us — yet can we trust the other person to care more, or will she or he be even worse? What a dilemma! No wonder only 60% of people vote — if even that many!

Then Jesus gave the most frustrating piece of advice that any politician would hate to hear, “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Look Jesus, that sounds nice, but I’ve got to raise money for my re-election. I can’t be bothered with the

poor — what will they give my campaign? What do I care about the day of resurrection of the righteous — election day is only a few weeks away and I have to say the right things to hold onto my job. Whether I believe what I say personally or not.

The question of God's Politics is one of accountability. Who will hold politicians accountable to the principles articulated in our Reformed tradition? First, you must and I must. We have to vote. We have to get involved. We cannot wring our hands about the state of the world and expect someone else to fix it. Second, we must involve ourselves in the politics of our community. I am proud to be your pastor because Collingswood Presbyterian has stood up — especially during this pandemic — to make our views public. Who knows how our simple signs have touched people's lives? Third, if the Church is to try to hold politicians accountable, then yes, we must be active in our Church's governance and deliberative processes. The statements of our General Assembly are not dreamed up in some hidden room in Louisville. They are the products of committees of elected elders who comb over every word and debate those words are consistent with scripture. We Presbyterians take our form of government for granted, but I can assure you very few denominations invite and encourage the participation of our members in our the process of governance and for developing our positions papers the way we do.

God's Politics begins with us. Jesus reminds us to be humble and to put the needs of the least, the last, and the lost first. Let us follow and demand our leaders do the same.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.