

SERMON
THE REV. POULSON REED
AUGUST 1, 2010
PROPER 13 C – THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“ON RELIGION & POLITICS”

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When it comes to religion and politics, there are two types of churches. One type of church embraces a political view wholeheartedly, and sees politics as a natural extension of their faith. I grew up in Virginia not too far from Jerry Falwell country, and many of us remember the 1980's, when through the Moral Majority many Southern Baptist and other churches became integral parts of the conservative political movement. Today, there are thousands of churches across the country that openly espouse conservative politics.

You can also find a smaller number of churches that are openly liberal in their politics. This includes churches in the United Church of Christ, independent churches, and increasing numbers of Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. Whether one thinks it is a good or bad trend, it is clear that the Episcopal Church, of which we are a member, has increasingly become more closely associated with the politics of the liberal and progressive movements.

There's a second type of church when it comes to religion and politics: one that ignores politics altogether. You'll hear phrases at these types of churches like “religion and politics just don't mix.” Usually these churches have a variety of political views in their congregation, and have decided that the best way to get along is to leave politics entirely out of it, to avoid controversy.

What prompts me to be thinking about these two types of churches? Perhaps it is that politics is all around us in Arizona these days, whether we like it or not.

Our immigration controversy is national news, and our Episcopal Diocese of Arizona has been in the middle of it. Bishop Smith, who leads our diocese, and a number of Episcopal churches and clergy have been vocal in their condemnation of SB 1070. They are exercising their faith in the way that seems most authentic to them.

But you will have noticed that All Saints' has stayed on the sidelines during this immigration debate. Individual members of our parish have been involved with the issue on both sides, but we have chosen as a parish not to take an official position or urge particular action.

All Saints' has a long tradition as a parish where people with a variety of different political and theological views can be together in community. And I plan to keep it that way. We are in a highly polarized era. Increasingly, people get their news from blogs or TV or radio programs that reflect only one side of the story. Political discourse has become more negative, with both Democrats and Republicans demonizing the other side.

I suspect our country has never been so politically divided, with so little respect for different points of view. Many churches have jumped right on that bandwagon. And there is no doubt that they are sincere in their beliefs that God favors some policies and political views, and opposes others.

But there is a different way, a third possibility. Not exactly ignoring politics, like that second type of church I mentioned, but putting politics in its proper perspective.

In our gospel reading today, someone comes to Jesus wanting him to settle a worldly dispute. “Tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But Jesus refuses. “Who set me to be a judge over you?” Jesus asks. Then, Jesus goes on to warn the man about the danger of greed.

He tells a parable about a greedy man who tried to gather more and more possessions. But then God took the man’s life suddenly, and he was unprepared. He had cared more about material riches than about spiritual ones.

Jesus turns the conversation from a worldly dispute to a spiritual message. Again and again Jesus does this in the gospels. Recall Jesus’ answer to the question about whether we ought to pay taxes: “give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus is much more interested in our responsibility to God than our obligations to or through government. Jesus and Saint Paul both encourage Christians to obey the laws of the land. But their chief concern is spiritual, not political.

This is not to say that our faith does not intersect with the wider society and even legislation and government. This summer, we have heard a series of readings from the Old Testament prophets, Hosea today. As far back as those prophets, nearly three thousand years ago, God has instructed us, through them, to care for the poor, the sick, for prisoners, widows, orphans and all those in need and to oppose injustice in our societies. Jesus continued this teaching, bringing comfort to the oppressed, and welcoming into his fellowship many who were neglected and discriminated against.

But it is my view that no political agenda, Democratic or Republican, perfectly matches the kingdom of God, which God holds out to us as the ideal. I find aspects of both political parties that resonate with the Bible’s teachings for me. In terms of much legislation or public policy, it is similarly difficult to pin down the Biblical perspective with absolute certainty. Countless websites are arguing for or against SB 1070 from a Biblical perspective; it just depends which Bible passages you pick.

If anything, the Bible teaches us to transcend political differences and to find unity as faithful children of God.

Recall Romans 12: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In Christ, we are united in baptism, charged with living lives of holiness, and working for God’s justice. Not one political party’s agenda, but God’s agenda.

What do I hope for All Saints? I hope that we can continue to be the kind of big tent that welcomes a wide variety of political, theological and other views. And I hope that we can model, with each other, the kind of respect and love that the wider culture so lacks these days. Many of us would disagree about a host of political issues. But we can see each other as fellow children of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ. And we can join together in praying, learning, serving and connecting for the good of the church and the world around us.

From time to time, I hope we can have discussions here at All Saints’ about controversial issues in our city and nation. We do not want to be a church with our heads in the sand. But we can do so in a balanced and thoughtful way, without rancor.

Nor does our big tent philosophy mean that clergy won’t, from time to time, touch on political and other sensitive issues. Preaching is a sacred exercise, driven, at its best, by the Holy Spirit. It is important that I give our

clergy and visiting clergy the freedom to preach as they see fit. Sometimes as clergy we say something in a sermon or class that rubs you the wrong way. Please talk to that person who upset you directly. They need to know that you were upset, and a constructive conversation can result.

I have had complaints that our preaching is too liberal, and also that it is too conservative. That makes me think we are probably doing something right!

And there is so much on which we can agree.

We can agree to help the poor, without agreeing on entitlement reform. We can learn about God, without agreeing on whether God is a Republican or a Democrat. We can respect the dignity of every human being, without agreeing on whether SB 1070 is the right approach to our immigration crisis. We can be prophetic in our critique of society, without being affiliated with a political ideology. We can encourage every parishioner to exercise their conscience in civic life, including politics, if they so choose. But we can do so without advocating one side over another, knowing that all our worldly interests and views are trumped by our commitment to Christ.

That's the kind of church I want to be a part of: a community of deep faith and loving service, in but not of the world. Amen.