

Well, a number of you have asked me if I will be telling you for whom to vote today.

The answer to that is a resounding no. In fact, if I do my job right, you might leave with some glimmer of a suspicion about my politics, but no more, and that only because none of us is completely without bias.

No, in a democratic republic that espouses separation of church and state, preaching a sermon on politics is probably almost as bad an idea as preaching a sermon on sex.

I spent far too much time selecting the tie I wore to church this morning – and I’m not often perplexed by sartorial conundrums. (I settled on a purple one.)

Indeed some of you may have heard Tony Campolo’s famous analogy about politics and faith, that it’s something akin to mixing manure and ice cream. It doesn’t much affect the manure, and it does little to improve the ice cream.

And of course, there was always H.L. Mencken’s assessment: “No one in this world has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people. Nor has anyone ever lost public office thereby.”

Mencken was not such a great fan of human nature.

But I do think that the feelings of these thinkers are not so far from the mainstream. For many Christians today there is a sense that the political system is somehow full of deceit and back-dealing. For many Christians today, there is a tension between living a Christian life and voting. Indeed, for those who feel most passionately about the candidates who are standing for office this election season, come November 7<sup>th</sup>, some percentage of the populace will find themselves feeling something like exiles under a government democratically elected but not of their choosing.

Indeed, I am just about certain that no matter which way the election concludes members of *this* congregation will be excited or disappointed. We are not a homogenous congregation any more than we are a homogenous nation.

So what I'd like for us to think about today is how to be a Christian in a country going through a general election. To that end, I'd like to begin by identifying two ways in which we relate to government. Then I'd like for us to spend a few minutes thinking of some things Christians ought *not* to do before finally concluding with a few things that Christians ought to do.

To my mind, there are really two primary ways in which the Christian relates to government. The first is to seek to influence government, and the second is to eschew all things government. I'm not sure that either represents the right way to be all the time.

In the first model, Christians seek to influence government. This is the scenario in which religious beliefs are used to shape legislation. You have perhaps heard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union which lead to Prohibition. You have perhaps heard of the influence that the religious groups exerted on California's Proposition 8 some time ago. And of course, there was a time in our country's history when religion was used as the basis for anti-miscegenation statutes that forbade persons of different races from marrying one another.

Two of those look like really bad ideas in retrospect, and the jury is out on the other. But when religious viewpoints have been legislated on to other people to ill-effect, it should leave little wonder that the church struggles sometimes to find fertile soil to plant the Gospel.

When one is in the majority, it is easy to forget that one may not always be the majority and sometimes the majority is not right.

There was a time when the United States was governed by many Episcopalians and Presbyterians. At this moment, there is not a mainline Protestant on either Presidential ticket. There is not a protestant Christian on the US Supreme Court.

How it was is not how it ever shall be.

And I do realize that this is running dangerously close to being a civics lesson and not a sermon, so let me come straight to the point: Jesus' strongest condemnation in the Gospels seems often to be reserved for those who present themselves as authoritative in matters of faith practice for people other than themselves – namely, the Pharisees.

Now I know that the Pharisees were well meaning. Indeed, I know that I have defended them on occasion and will again. However, Jesus often identifies their well, *Pharisaical* behavior as highly problematic.

We do well to take that under advisement.

However, the stance of eschewing all things government also has its flaws. In the minor prophets, about which Drew is teaching an excellent series, we will readily find much of God's disfavor displayed for the belief that what we do doesn't matter to God, that nations can with impunity ignore the needs of people in their midst to the benefit of others. In order to construct a faith system wherein persons of faith are not responsible for the conduct of our common life together requires us to slash at our own holy text because the Bible is full of the expectation that we will seek to live in good and harmonious communities – indeed, the whole law seems to be founded upon the conviction that this is a good thing.

We have heard for the past five weeks straight some form of the Shema, an old Creed of Judaism, that forms the heart of the great Commandment: we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all of our strength, with all of our soul and with all of our minds, and the second is like unto it, that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

John Calvin noted that the Decalogue could be divided into the first table of the Law and the Second table of the Law, with the first table, or commandments, being oriented toward how we relate to God and the second being oriented to how we relate to each other.

The very foundation of our faith assumes our commitment and expectation to work for good community.

Which is enough to leave a Christian in a political season in at least something of a quandary, no?

I must confess, with a certain amount of humility, that there is sufficient diversity in the Biblical witness as to how persons of faith relate to government that I am not sure that I can give a definitive answer to my own question. But I do think we can establish some helpful parameters, which brings us to what not to do.

This one is pretty easy to come up with. Remember what Mr. Rogers taught us about living in community: be kind to one another and respect one another.

There are any number of vilifying, disrespectful remarks that I have heard directed at persons running for political office. Socialist and Vulture Capitalist just jump right to mind as two of the sillier ones. Silly, but no less disrespectful and hurtful.

God is not pleased when we mock, malign, or in any way rundown any person for any reason at any time.

No part of that type of behavior is pleasing to God.

Which is not to say that persons of faith must live uncritically. We are certainly expected to use our brains and to be thoughtful. But God does assume we'll act like Christians while we're doing it.

The second is that as we are thinking critically about politics, we must remember not to be uncritical of ourselves. I seem to recall Jesus' words to some Pharisees about being able to see the splinter in someone else's eye while being oblivious to the plank in their own eyes. The teachings still apply.

Finally, when thinking critically about others and ourselves, we remember that judgment ultimately belongs to God, who does not tolerate rivals for the claim. Persons of faith will vote in many ways in this election, and perceived wrongness of political thought does not mean less faith or less conviction. God is always, ultimately in charge of the world, which, should my candidate lose, I'll take as a comfort.

There is plenty more of "what not to do." I read a good, if simplistic, article a few weeks back in an online magazine named *Relevant* entitled, "Seven Things Christians Need to Remember about Politics." I commend it to your attention.

At the same time, though, we remember that God does not ever want us to be so concerned about getting it wrong that we do nothing. Which brings us to what *to* do.

I love that passage of Jeremiah that we read today. I particularly love the admonition to seek the welfare of the city where we are. In the Hebrew, it reads *Shalom*. We are to seek the *shalom* of the city where God has called us to be.

The city just means the community and it can be as large or as small as the political entity needs to be to include the whole community.

And God's word to that community that Jeremiah addressed was to seek the shalom of their community.

And what is so striking to me is that it is the community in which the Israelites are exiled.

So they weren't the dominant voice. Indeed they weren't even a respected voice per se.

And yet, God counsels them to seek the well-being of their community.

And that Word carries to us still.

Regardless of what a Christian believes about the role of government or the present or future incumbent of high office, the calling remains to seek the good, to seek what is better and to work diligently for that shalom for which God created us.

At the end of the day, no matter how passionately we feel about a candidate or party or popular movement, no matter how deeply disappointed we are when we lose or how jubilant we are when we win, we are still a community. We are a community of faith living in a community in need of reconciliation. And we're called to be the agents of reconciliation, as Paul reminded us in 2 Corinthians.

That's a big call. We'll need some fortification for it. We'll need to eat hearty and get up our strength.

Isn't it wonderful that there is a table set for us to do just that?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.