

Humility in Our Political Lives

Is anyone here, besides me, looking forward to the end of this election season? I have always been fully engaged in the political process because I see it as the way in which we, the people, decide how we live together. In this great ongoing experiment we call democracy, we address big questions, such as what are our visions of community, how should we treat newcomers and outsiders, what should be the priorities of our state and our country. In California, with our commitment to direct democracy, we get to enact or reject 17 different proposed laws.

These are important issues on which reasonable minds can differ. And, as people of faith, we have the opportunity to put our faith into action. But, unfortunately, it certainly looks like we can no longer disagree in a civil manner. The other side is stupid or negligent or corrupt. We no longer just have differences of opinion; there are Republican facts and Democratic facts and very few chances for meeting in the middle. God is on our side, not yours.

I had hoped that we in the Bay Area would be spared the nastiness of presidential campaign commercials but I was wrong. Last night, I saw my first. What is particularly disturbing to me is that politicians use negative ads because they are more effective than positive ones.

What does that say about us as voters and how far we've come from the teachings of Jesus and his vision of the kingdom of God.

Today's Gospel reading (Luke 18:9-14) is one of a series of teachings in which Jesus talks about the kingdom of God. The kingdom, which Jesus teaches is among us, (Luke 17:21) is characterized by wholeness and compassion, justice, faithfulness and humility. In this lesson, we meet two familiar faces, a righteous Pharisee and a tax collector. As we know, the Pharisee represents the first century religious establishment with which Jesus had some conflict.

That the tax collector is the outsider is something we already know but how much of an outsider is worth a brief discussion. My first job as a lawyer was representing a tax collector; I spent quite a bit of my time on the telephone, fielding questions from the public. People generally don't enjoy paying taxes and many weren't shy about sharing their low opinions of my field of expertise. All grumbling aside, however, they knew that the tax law I enforced was enacted by their duly elected representatives (the state legislature), that it was implemented and collected without regard to political favors and that those of us who implemented the tax were not enriched in any way by the money that was collected.

This was not the case in the first century occupied Holy Land. Jews who became tax collectors collaborated with the Romans, who were the occupying power and

unclean Gentiles. Tax collectors were expected to generate a certain amount of revenue from their territories and were left to their own devices as to how to get it. As long as the Romans received the money they wanted, tax collectors could pocket as much as they could and use whatever methods at their disposal to collect the tax. To call the tax collector a collaborator is not to compare him to the IRS but with someone who betrays his people, like a Bernie Madoff who cheated thousands of people out of their life savings or those who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

When Jesus lifted up the tax collector, his audience must have been shocked. Not for the first time, Jesus reaches out to the lowest of the lowly, not the well-educated man of the temple, and brings the outsider into the family.

Acknowledging his limitations and not his accomplishments, the tax collector opened his heart to God and found forgiveness, acceptance.

“All who humble themselves will be exalted.”

As much as I would like to change the tone for American elections in the 21st century, I cannot. What I can do, however, is to listen to what God wants us to do. Jesus didn't care what the tax collector did for a living; he cared about humility before God and with each other. This is the good news of today's gospel: wherever we are on our journey, whatever we've done to separate ourselves from God and each other, we are welcomed when we humble ourselves, acknowledge our shortcomings and turn back to God.

Too often in our political lives, I fear that many of us have more in common with the righteous Pharisee than we do with the tax collector: certain of the rightness of our actions, smug in the wisdom of our opinions, disdainful of people who don't agree with us.

But God calls us to something far more difficult than being right. We are called to be humble. To be open to the possibility that we are not always right, that people who disagree with us politically are not always wrong. When we open our hearts to each other, we are opening our hearts to God.

I would like to end with this Prayer for the 2016 Election, written by Fr. Justin:

Gracious and loving God, Creator and Redeemer of all. We pray for your children who are seeking to serve this nation as President: Hillary Clinton, Gary Johnson, Jill Stein, Donald Trump, each given life by your Spirit and loved as a child of your own. As sinners who, like us, are broken, imperfect, and in need of healing, bless them and hold them each in the palm of your hand. As frail human beings who like us are tainted by selfishness, fears, and internal struggles known to you alone, grant them healing of mind, body, and spirit. Where we disagree with them, may we disagree with respect. May we learn to love those we label our

"enemies," and pray for those with whom we disagree. May we not belittle or demean the dignity of any human being, especially those who belittle or demean. We pray for this nation, all who will vote, all who do not have the right to vote, and all who chose not to vote this election. Protect us from violence, and lead us into an election filled with hope and grace. This we pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

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