

Sermon Summary, Proper 10, Year C

11 August 2019

The Rev. Daniel P. Richards

Christ Church of the Ascension

Paradise Valley

9 a.m.

It is ridiculous that we are at this point as a people, but here we are. The readings today all point to this basic reminder and through it to something deeper that gives it more context, but the message is embarrassingly simple.

Remember that, and it will get you through the rest of this.

This morning I am going to explain why I don't talk about politics from the pulpit very much, but I am also going to explain why we have to talk about politics sometimes.

First off, I do not tell people how to vote because I have sat in that sermon, gotten that email, and read that post; and I was not persuaded. But even more, my job is not to get you to be Democrats or Republicans, or even good citizens. My job is coach, teach, and pastor you to be people of the Gospel, Christ followers, and Christians who live in this world which is not yet fully redeemed. My vocation is to be your priest and not your political or community organizer.

And to be honest, my own political record is not all that great. I have voted for people I later regretted and causes that I came to see differently over time. I don't want you to vote like me. I want you to follow Christ as you vowed to do at your baptism, and represent him as ambassadors of his kingdom.

Being your pastor means that I worry about how you conduct yourself in the world because you do not represent yourself only, but you represent God in the world. I have been teaching about this lately, and you have heard me say that as human beings we bear the image of God and are to be as God would be in the world; vessels of grace, carriers of the Gospel. We are to live as God's sons and daughters, and that is lived in our prayers, private lives, and our politics.

In the book of Isaiah, we get a basic picture of what happens when we fail to understand that God cares about our politics as much as our worship. "I do not delight in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats . . . Cease to do evil! Learn to do good!" The people's worship was meaningless and did not honor God because it was not congruent with their lives, personal or political.

The people of Israel were supposed to represent what God is like in the world in their worship, but even more for the prophets, in their ethical treatment of each other, the poor, and the stranger in the land. That language is not political speech from today's headlines, but rather it is the language of the Torah, the Law, and the Prophets. It is God's language.

If you are a person who seeks to represent God, the God of Israel, the Bible, and Jesus of Nazareth, you cannot neglect other people, especially the poor and the immigrant. It is not an option for you. If you choose to do so, you are in essence saying, "I choose *not* to represent the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, and his Son Jesus." And though the promises given are free, you may not accept the promises of citizenship in his kingdom and may endanger your very soul.

That is harsh. But, that is the Bible's word from Genesis to Revelation.

So you see how I have to talk about politics a little to be a faithful pastor? It is unavoidable.

On the other hand, there are a lot of faithful ways that you can care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. But before I give you some room, let's make this slightly more uncomfortable.

Immigration is one of the largest and most complex issues in American politics today. This administration has made it central to its mission. Now, let's be honest about the issue: a nation has to control its borders and manage the flow of people, but we can do so humanely.

In our country we offer social help, mild democratic socialism, in the form of food and medical assistance, housing, and economic aid, not to mention welfare services, social services, psychological services, and even transportation assistance. We voted for it and supported it numerous times over the last hundred years. These forms of assistance pervade our government and our lives as citizens.

What I saw as a pastor and priest down in the southern part of our state was that unregulated illegal immigration created a hardship for the poor seeking those services. When we offer the same services to those here but not registered, those resources get lost to those here legally, by birth or migration.

And before you write off the people coming across the border, most of them are Christians: Roman Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and even Anglicans. All of them are human beings, and most are simply seeking the opportunities our forebears sought.

So we have competing values.

Those competing values have several immediately obvious answers and more complex and deeper ones that may not be so obvious. The work to figure out a real answer to migration issues will involve compromises of deeply held values. That is the work of good politics. And I believe in that work, though like others I am often disappointed in the compromises. We could argue for years about how to handle this issue.

But you cannot neglect your neighbors in any case. You should not do evil in your politics or your speech. You gave up that option at your baptism.

We live in a time of politics as divisive as ever. But there is much to be thankful for. We live in one of the wealthiest times in one of the wealthiest nations ever. Especially as common people.

I had this friend and mentor who was a Lutheran minister I served with in Michigan. He had two small Lutheran and Episcopal churches, and we often rode downstate to meetings together. Some of my fondest memories of Tom are being bundled up in his car driving in a blizzard with the windows cracked while he smoked a pipe and sang the Lutheran settings of the liturgy from their Book of Worship.

He and his wife had this small place way up north on a peninsula where in the winter the wind blew straight from one part of Lake Michigan to another blowing the snow so hard it often didn't even land in his yard. In my mind, it was a cold harsh place in winter, but they would sit on their porch in the evening and say, with indoor plumbing and central heating, they "lived better than the kings and queens of England."

We forget that we have it so good. We are the blessed. But we have much work to do, even today. And I have many political opinions, but I rarely stand up here and tell you how to respond politically. But I will say again, Do good and do not do evil. Be good and do not be evil.

Jesus tells us, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

What do you have to be afraid of, you children of the living God, who made the heavens and the earth, spun the Horsehead Nebula and molded the salamander? God has made all things for you, why let someone talk you into fear? Be bold. Be generous. Be good.

You have a kingdom, why will you not share your bounty?
You have eternal life? Why are you afraid of anyone?

Be bold. Our current and previous bishops both belong to Bishops Against Gun Violence, which is just ridiculous. This, of course, replaced the previous Bishops *For* Gun Violence Working Group, which was preceded by Bishops for Stabbings. We are in such a state that we have bishops who have to proclaim that they are against violence.

There are lots of complex issues in the world, but there are some that are so basic that we all should be able to see good and evil, but we are persuaded that morality is political, and that our responses are set by the parties we belong to, but that is a lie. Satan is real, and he has lobbyists. Don't be one. Do not support evil. Support good things.

Step back from your allegiances to party and politics and spend some time with Christ to whom you owe your life. Get your allegiances right. We are for Christ, and so we are for the good.

Many of you have wondered about my time with the fire department, and it amounts to less time than some people put into their hobbies. I guess you could say my hobby is holding up the good men and women of the city, but that work puts me out there in some places I would not ever go, and I can tell you there is real evil in the world. There is real evil in our city.

This is not the "I had wait ten minutes in construction" evil, but life destroying, child sacrificing, violence, abuse, and degradation evil. And there are men and women who stay awake so that we can sleep at night. They are doing the good in ways that most of us never see. Give thanks for them. Pray for them and their families.

That is part of our politics too. We are for those who do the good, and we are against those who do evil, recognizing as Paul says, Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers . . ." We are not against people, but against the spiritual forces they come to represent. Those who work for the good deserve our prayers, our support, and our honesty.

In our work for God, we must not mistake that our enemies are less than we are. They are human beings who represent something else, something greater than themselves. We battle evil, not people. And it takes a discerning eye to know if a person is good or evil. Do you have it?

We must think carefully about how we are to live, who we are to support, and be clear-eyed about the compromises that we make. But we must also not relent in our belonging to Christ.

Get your heart right. Jesus gives us a way to aim our heart and correct our allegiances. Use your money to aim your heart. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I have always heard this as a statement of being, an ontological truth. But what if it is a strategy?

Jesus tells us to in the same passage, like Isaiah, to give alms. Now that is, to be clear, money to the poor. Neither your political contributions nor your pledges count. Alms are moneys given to those in need.

Amy and I have supported a girl through LoveJustice for well over a decade now. Amy had adopted her just before we started dating, and we have sent along a little money every month to support her care and education. The amazing thing is not the money given, but how that little amount has pulled our hearts halfway around the world. Our children have grown up with a girl they have never met face to face, and we have remained aware of those doing the good work in places we have never been.

What will be that for you? How will you check your allegiances? How can you be an ambassador for Christ? A child of God?

Do good, and not evil.

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The Rev. Daniel Paul Richards
Christ Church of the Ascension
Paradise Valley, Arizona
www.ccaaz.org