

Our Faith, Our Vote, Our Voice
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Mark 12:28-34

This morning I am going to preach about politics and more specifically the issues before us on Voting Day this coming November 4th.

Before I do that let me state clearly how we can and cannot speak about politics in church.

As a charity and non-profit, we cannot endorse any particular candidate. Neither I nor the Moderator nor the Church Council can stand up and, as a representative of the church, tell you to vote for Person A or Person B. We cannot endorse a political party. That is being partisan. That is illegal.

We are however allowed to be political. In fact it would be nearly impossible to be a church and not be political in some way shape or form. And to follow Jesus seriously, speaking up for the widow, the orphan, the poor and the oppressed, we in fact must speak politically because issues of economics and justice and anti-semitism and racism all happen in the public political sphere.

As I read this week on the UCC website, "Politics is often taken to be a dirty word, but political processes are simply the way communities organize their common life. For people of faith, public policy is never merely politics. It is a way of living out the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves."

Additionally, in the UCC we also have freedom of the pulpit. This means two things. First, that as you call a pastor, you give them the freedom to preach however they feel called to do so understanding that what they say may or may not be what you think, or believe, or what you like. Of course, we also vote our pastors in and, in some cases, out, so freedom of the pulpit can be so freeing that a pastor is freed from her call.

Secondly, in the UCC what I preach does not speak for you, each of you out there. The pulpit is free, and it is in some ways limited. This is true when pastors speak out and lend their name to petitions and protests. I can sign my name as a pastor and the authority of that office that is vested in me. But in doing so I am not signing Pilgrim's name or saying this is what Pilgrim thinks. That takes a vote of Council or, more likely, one of the church.

So, given that page of caveats, let's get to it. How are you going to vote this election season? And what does your faith have to do with your vote?

First, I urge you to go vote. We are told that voting is a civic duty. But I believe it is also a religious duty. How do we help the poor in this country? Through our social service safety net, through retraining programs and Head Start. Who creates the net? We do with through our elected officials. So our call to lift up the poor and oppressed is lived out in part by voting. Public policy is set by voting. We have three questions on the ballot this year that will be decided by voting. Your vote matters.

So yes, voting is a Christian responsibility even in this land of separation of church and state. Or more properly, voting is a faith-life responsibility, to include our interfaith neighbors and partners in justice work.

Ensuring that all people get to vote is another place where our faith life intersects with voting. Making sure legislatively that barriers are not put in place for voting is one aspect. Getting people to the polls when they lack transportation is another. Does your neighbor need a ride to the polls? Ask. Even their yard sign is different than yours.

So how shall we vote--what drives your decisions about what candidates to vote for or how to vote on the questions?

Our faith. Our faith leads us in how we make decisions about all sorts of things. What to buy, whether to put solar panels on our house, how to relate to our cranky boss and our lonely neighbor. Our faith also leads us in how to vote.

We believe as a church in a world that values all people, works for equality for all, seeks economic fairness, looks to protect the vulnerable, and seeks peace. And this means---perhaps most challenging of all--that to vote faithfully, meaning to vote loving our neighbor as ourselves---that we may vote against our own self interest.

I remember having this discussion with my mom many years back. My mom is comfortably retired having lived a very frugal life, having been lucky, and had a good education. We were talking about how to vote and she said she was going to vote for the candidate that would in fact raise her taxes. She was going to vote for the person that would ensure she would pay more than she was now and not receive anything more.

Because, she said, those extra taxes were going to pay for things like better health access for the poor and universal kindergarten. My mom doesn't have any kindergartners at home. Her health insurance is fine.

But her faith, her belief that Jesus calls us to love neighbor as self, to provide for neighbor as we are provided for, led her to vote against what made financial sense for her personally.

So when we look at our ballot with the eyes of faith, we may see it very differently than with eyes that are seeking to vote for what is good for me. We shift from me, to us. From me, to the least of these. From my concern, to Christ's concern.

I think that is the difference when we vote with our faith in mind. That shift. From what I want, what I hope to get, what I think will benefit me, to what will benefit those who need it the most, those who are hurting. What vote best supports them?

Which brings me to this year's election. Like I said, I won't be speaking about any candidates except to say that when you read what they promise, what their platform stands for, consider how those promises will make a difference in the lives of those Jesus most talks about: the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, the imprisoned, the oppressed, the grieving.

So on to the three questions that are before us this year. I am going to do them in reverse order.

Question 3:

Question 3 asks whether to preserve the current rights of transgender people to accommodation in public spaces. Public spaces include libraries, parks, restaurants--pretty much anywhere that isn't work or home.

To vote yes is to keep these rights in place. To vote no is to take these rights away.

Many religious groups are advocating no on Question 3 because they believe either transgender folks are not considered beloved of God and or are unworthy of protections. Others endorse a no vote because of fears of women being harassed in public restrooms.

The facts are that it is a crime to harass or in any other way inappropriately use a public restroom. Question 3 does not change or alter that in any way. Those states that have protections for transgender folks have not had any uptick in restroom related crimes.

So a Yes vote means transgender people can continue to use the restroom that aligns with their gender identity, often the way they are externally perceived. But it also means affirming that transgender folks have value and are equally entitled to protection under the law. They are not “other”; they are our neighbor.

As an Open and Affirming church, one that welcomes and affirms transgender individuals as part of the family of God and included in the life of this church, we seek as faithful people to stand with our transgender brothers and sisters to protect them as one of the most vulnerable populations in the US. Definitely who Jesus is talking about when he mentions oppressed.

For me then, my faith leads me to vote yes on Questions 3, a vote of solidarity, a vote to love my neighbor as myself, to see my neighbor as one equally created in the image of God.

Question 2:

Question 2 asks whether a panel of non-paid volunteers should convene to push for a Constitutional Amendment that would reverse the ruling on Citizens United which decided that the government could not limit the amount of money corporations, unions, and other nonprofits could raise and spend to influence candidate elections.

Jesus talked a lot about money: how we accumulate it, how we spend it, how much each person does or does not have, what economic justice looks like. He yelled at the religious leaders of his day for using money to create an oppressive system that supported their own desires.

In our day there are widespread concerns across the political spectrum about the amount of money spent in elections. If those who have more money can spend as much as they want to get what they want, our political system starts to resemble first century Roman Empire where wealth carried the day.

When I look at Question 2 with the lens of faith, I see all the people not represented by the money pouring into politics. Those who don't have thousands to give to candidates so their issues will be noticed. I also see all those who won't probably run for office because it costs so much money. I don't see any equitable system. I don't see space for my homeless neighbor and my single mom neighbor. I see that a system with less money in it can be a more just system. And even if those putting in gobs of money represent my own personal interests, my faith tells me that I need to vote for justice.

So my faith moves me to vote Yes on Question 2.

And then we reach question 1 which I have saved for last because most people agree it is the hardest one. It is for me personally. Question 1 which asks whether to implement a system of minimum nursing staffing numbers at hospitals.

Nurses take care of people at their most vulnerable. When they are sick, traumatized, or dying. We all want good nursing care for ourselves and for those we love. Jesus asks us to prioritize good nursing care for everyone--our neighbor as much as ourself-- and to care for our neighbors who are nurses. Nurses with fewer patients potentially can offer better care to those patients.

Hospitals that are the most crowded now, in particular psychiatric hospitals and those that serve the poorer areas, will be most impacted by this change, and fewer people will be admitted and served. Potentially many more people will be left with nowhere to go when in trauma or mental health crisis.

How does my faith help me decide on Question 1?

I have read widely. I have looked at the endorsements for each side. I have looked at the results of a similar measure passed in California 20 years ago. I have read articles by people I trust in journalism. I have heard from nurses in the field. I have reflected and listened.

And I stand here undecided. Like much of Massachusetts. Like the evenly divided polls.

I see people trying to protect the good on both sides--different goods to be sure, but good.

I see people who are frustrated with trying to change the system, and people struggling to live within the fractured health system we have. I hear fear--fear of unbearable hours and mistakes, fear of people dying for lack of care.

My faith has taken me to this point on Question 1. It has not given me an answer.

But it has given me something else. Compassion.

And that is what I want to close with today.

We all know we live in an unbearably divided political climate right now. Hate and lies are everywhere. The risk of Thanksgiving dinner has gone from having a bellyache from too much turkey to having a heartache from arguments with one's family.

And as we have seen this past week, hate rhetoric leads to hate speech leads to acts of hate. Leads to eleven people dead while worshipping peacefully on a Saturday morning.

We cannot hate our way out of this mess. We can't spend our way of it. Compassion is the only way forward. To love our neighbor as ourselves. Our Democrat neighbor, our Republican neighbor, our Libertarian neighbor, our Socialist neighbor. To listen respectfully to all. And to stand up in protest when the line is crossed from disagreement on issues to hate against peoples.

We can and should speak up for the marginalized. We can and should vote for people and policies that reach out toward the less able and less wealth and those who just have less. That is a clear mandate of our faith.

But we are called to do it in a civil way, with civil voice. Without demonizing the other side no matter how much we disagree.

So friends. Go vote.

Vote with your faith in mind. Vote with your neighbor in mind. Take your neighbor to the polls if he or she needs a ride.

And speak without hate. Even without those terrible political jokes we tell others in our in circle.

Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States of America: “Always vote for principle, though you may vote alone, and you may cherish the sweetest reflection that your vote is never lost.”