

## **Parties, politics, and impertinent puzzles**

Luke 20:27-40

November 6, 2016

In three days, it will be over. Except that it won't be over, will it?

If the Democratic candidate prevails, the Republican candidate and many of his supporters have suggested they will not acknowledge the legitimacy of the result and, therefore, the legitimacy of the newly elected administration.

One Republican senator has already warned that if the Democratic nominee is elected, impeachment proceedings will be initiated on day one.

Three other Republican senators have promised to refuse to consider any supreme court nominee proposed by the Democrat president.

In other words, it's not over. The campaign goes on, and it'll be more of the same: more of the same gridlock, more of the same government that cannot get anything done.

On the other hand, if the Republican candidate wins, what do you think will happen? Do you think Democrats will line up to pledge their readiness to work with the new president? Do you think they will shake hands and move on?

They didn't shake hands, did they, the two candidates when they shared a debate stage? We have a tradition in hard fought contests, at least in athletic contests, of shaking hands before and after, acknowledging that though we may play for different teams, we give each other respect. But they didn't shake hands, and once the election is finished, neither will their teammates.

Has it always been this way? This bitter? This divisive? This intransigent? This stuck?

We have always had political parties and that is mostly a good thing. Political parties enable people to organize and advocate. Political parties promote specific values and styles of governing, and political parties provide a crucial dissenting voice to keep those in power from exercising unlimited power.

Except that somewhere along the line, things got confused. Priorities got distorted. Perspective was lost. Winning became more important than ... anything! Than everything! It's not any more about what is good for the country, but about what is good for the party.

Here's what I think. I think we have much more in common -- Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, left and right, black and white -- much more in common than we realize. Even where there are clear differences of opinion, our views are much more nuanced than either politicians or reporters give us credit for. Most of us are not necessarily in the middle, but if you put two of us together, even from different ends of the political spectrum, we can have a meaningful and respectful and mutually enlightening conversation, if

we are given the chance. And when we do, we realize that though our solutions may look different, we are motivated by deep values and principles that we hold in common: the sacredness of life, freedom, liberty and justice for all.

It is not our political differences that so divide us, not the game itself, but the way we play the game. Winning is everything. Losing is not an option. It's not about what is good for the country, good for the people, but what is good for the party. Ideology matters more than people.

There were parties in Jesus' day, too, not Republicans and Democrats, but Pharisees and Sadducees. The two parties had their differences. Sadducees favored a strict interpretation of the written law, while Pharisees were willing to argue its implications and make fresh applications based on their own interpretations. Sadducees came largely from the wealthy class, Pharisees from among the people. The Sadducees were willing to cooperate with the Roman authorities to make life easier, while the Pharisees kept their distance, carefully guarding their distinctive Jewish identity. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, the Sadducees did not.

And so they sniped at each other and waged ideological warfare, but, really, they had so much in common! They were alike Jews, Jews who, one way or another, had to learn to survive in a world run by Romans. They were alike people of the book, people of the law, people who believed that God had gifted them with the law in order to show them how to live well, how to live in harmony with God and with each other and with the earth, gifted them with the law in order to bless them and to empower them to be a blessing to all the peoples of the world.

Pharisees and Sadducees had much in common, but it seems the only thing they could agree on was their antipathy for Jesus. So they did their best, all of them, to trip Jesus up with his own words, to make him look bad, to get him in trouble with the people and with Rome. The Pharisees asked him about paying taxes to the Emperor, hoping to get him arrested for sedition. And the Sadducees posed him an elaborate "what if" puzzle, intending to expose the foolishness of any belief in resurrection: "Whose wife will she be?"

But Jesus wouldn't play their games. The Sadducees and Pharisees failed alike in their efforts to discredit him, not because he proved the better debater, but because he refused to debate. It was not Jesus's aim to repudiate their beliefs or to expose the shortcomings of their ideologies, promoting instead his own ideology, hoping to attract adherents to a new religion. Jesus didn't expose their ideology, but their hypocrisy. He didn't repudiate their beliefs, but their failure to live their beliefs.

And he didn't come to start a new religion, but to call people back to God, back to the God they already knew or were supposed to know, calling them to rely wholly on God, instead of their own carefully constructed systems. Should we pay taxes to the Emperor? Pay the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor and pay to God what belongs to God! Whose wife will she be? Who cares! The question is immaterial. God is, and to God, all are alive and that is what matters. So whose side are you on, Jesus? God's side!

Jesus didn't see Pharisees, Sadducees, tax collectors, prostitutes, liberals, conservatives, Jews, Gentiles. He saw people, human beings created by God, children of God. The Pharisees and Sadducees lost their way when defending their ideologies became more important than caring about people. Jesus never lost his way. Jesus is the way.

In three days, it will be over. I know for a fact that some of you will vote Republican and some of you Democrat, and perhaps, some of you, neither. But let's not lose our way! It is important to vote because policy affects people, so if we care about people, if we love our neighbors, we will care about policy. But we must not be beholden to any policy or any party or any ideology. No human leader can save us. We depend on God and God alone!

So before and after we vote, we can shake hands.

No, more than that! Before and after we vote, we can hug each other!

No, more than that! Before we vote, and after, we come together to the Lord's table, eating and drinking to remember Jesus, eating and drinking to remember that Jesus is here leading us, that Jesus is here binding us together, eating and drinking to remember that what we hold in common -- that we are held in common by God's love -- matters more, so much more, than anything that divides us.