

Red, white, and blue

Isaiah 49:1-7

November 5, 2006

Two more days. Just two more days!

In two more days, we will go to the polls, our votes will be counted, and the election will be over. Thank the Lord! No more nasty TV ads! No more recorded telephone calls! No more mailboxes stuffed with political flyers! Thank the Lord!

The 2006 political campaign has been particularly ugly. If you believe the ads, only liars and traitors and hard-hearted scoundrels are running for office this year. Now we know that's not true. We know that most of the folks seeking office are good people, concerned citizens, dedicated public servants. But, even so, the negative campaigning casts a shadow of dishonesty and meanness and sleaziness over the whole process, over all the candidates, and makes us not want to vote at all.

But we will. We will vote because we are conscientious citizens, because we take seriously our important role in a participatory democracy, and because we understand what is at stake. So in two more days, we will go to the polls and cast our votes.

When we do, how will we vote? Specifically, I am wondering about how we will vote as people of faith, how we will vote as Christians. I have taken the liberty of color-coding the mission inserts you received with your worship bulletin this morning: red for Republicans, blue for Democrats. If you believe you have been given the wrong bulletin by mistake, please raise your hand and the ushers will exchange it for you. Just kidding!

But the fact is, if we were to identify ourselves by party preference, I'm sure we would have lots of red and lots of blue in the sanctuary this morning. Do you find that strange? Do you find it at all strange that people whose minds and hearts and values are molded by their faith in Jesus would have very different political allegiances? Did you know that the Iowa House District 19 race pits two candidates from the same congregation, Nazareth Lutheran Church, against each other? Do you find that strange?

It's not surprising. It's not surprising because well-intentioned and thoughtful people can disagree about the best solutions to complex problems. It's not surprising because most political issues require us to weigh one good against another good: liberty against security, the rights of the few against the rights of the majority, economic growth against responsible stewardship. It's not surprising because neither political party has a corner on morality. Both parties have their strengths and their flaws. And it's not surprising because the political system itself is flawed. Our leaders are human and humans are flawed. We can only expect so much from our leaders: *Don't put your trust in human leaders, the scripture says, no human being can save you.*

It's not surprising that we would have very different political allegiances, but it is a little strange. It is strange because I firmly believe that faith has everything to do with politics, everything to do with the way we as Christians understand and participate in the political process. Genuine faith is always political. Now relax! Don't get excited! Before you get all bent out of shape, let me explain!

First, we need to define what we mean by politics. Politics refers to the system by which social relationships are organized and managed. Politics refers to the assignment and exercise of power to order community life toward some intended purpose. I didn't say, "for the sake of the common welfare," because that may or may not be true of any given political system. Politics is the system that determines how the people of a given community are fed, sheltered, protected, and provided for, the system that assigns rights to people and establishes a mechanism for guaranteeing those rights.

In other words, politics is the way we organize ourselves to take care of each other. But isn't taking care of each other a fundamental Christians duty? When Jesus said, *Love your neighbor*, he surely meant more than just thinking nice thoughts about them! Love is the standard by which we relate to our neighbors: providing for them, serving them, protecting them, defending them.

As followers of Jesus, we pray, *Thy kingdom come*, and we serve the cause of that kingdom by doing the will of God as best we are able. As Brian McLaren points out in *The Secret Message of Jesus*, when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God, he is intentionally choosing the language of politics. In the midst of a world ordered by political kingdoms and ruled by political kings of one sort or another, Jesus calls us to serve another kingdom. Jesus calls us to serve a different king.

Psalms 146 tells us what this king is like. This king judges in favor of the oppressed. This king gives food to the hungry. This king sets prisoners free. This king lifts those who have fallen. This king protects the strangers in our land. This king helps widows and orphans. That sure sounds like a political agenda to me! If you are looking for a suitable platform for a faith-based politics, here it is!

Genuine faith is always political, because when we love God, we share God's concern for the everyday welfare of all the people God loves. The only way faith could have nothing to do with politics would be if faith had nothing to do with the quality of life on this earth. But why then would we pray, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?*

Genuine faith is always political, but politics is not faith. Remember the caution: *Don't put your trust in human leaders; no human being can save you.* As Christians, we are engaged in the political process because the political process impacts people's lives, but we are realistic about the limits -- and dangers -- of political power. We serve a different king. We are loyal to a different kingdom. We are not first of all Republicans or Democrats or even Americans. We are, first and last, God's people.

And as God's people, we have a distinctive political agenda. We are called to be servants, not rulers, the Lord's servants, chosen, equipped, and sent to do the Lord's work. We are appointed, as Israel was, to bring together God's scattered people, to restore the honor and dignity of the people of God, to preserve the unity of God's church, and to ensure that the witness of the church to the world is strong and clear.

This is our greater task, not just to build up the church and protect ourselves from being sullied and subdued by the rest of the world, but to be *a light to the nations, so that all the world may be saved!* Our primary political agenda is to shine a light, to shine the light of God's goodness and justice and mercy into a world so often stumbling around in the dark, so that all the world may be saved.

Some of you were given white inserts in your worship bulletins. That's our color, the color of light! Not red, not blue, but white, because we are called to be a light to the nations. We are called to witness to the glory of God's way.

Is it possible to be a Christian and to be a Republican? Yes. I know some wonderfully dedicated followers of Jesus who vote Republican.

Is it possible to be a Christian and to be a Democrat? Yes. I know some wonderfully dedicated followers of Jesus who vote Democrat.

But no political party and no political leader deserves our absolute loyalty. We serve a different king. We follow a different leader. And it is that king, that leader, who sets the political agenda. It is our job to bring that agenda to light.

If genuine faith is always political, if being faithful followers of Jesus always has political implications, what does that mean for our life together as a church family? First of all, it means we should not shy away from political conversations in the church, not conversations about political power or about political personalities, but conversations about light, God's light, conversations about the things God's light shows us, the places to which God's light leads us, the political agenda to which God's light calls us.

It means that we should get involved, as individual Christians and as a church, involved in the political debate, involved in the affairs of community and nation and world.

It means we should not just do charity, but do justice, not just pick up the pieces of broken bodies and broken spirits after a cruel world has had its way with them, but advocate for laws and social systems that will keep them whole and protect them from injustice and give them access to life's blessings.

It means that when we leave this sanctuary and go to the polling place, to the council room, to the office, to the classroom, wherever we go, we go as Christians, thinking and voting and acting and living as followers of Jesus' way ... for the sake of this world, this world full of people all of whom God intends to save ... and to bring honor and praise to the Lord God, our one and only leader.