

Homily – God the Soul and Politics

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The etymology or origin of words is often a great place to start when exploring a topic or idea, and today, I want to begin with a Latin word, a Greek word, and an old English word. *Religio* means to re-ligament or reconnect, and is the basis of our word “religion”. And, *polis* simply means city or forum, and is the basis of our word “politics”. And the old English word is *oneing* o-n-e-i-n-g. This is a word used by Julian of Norwich back in the fifteenth century to describe the encounter between God and the soul. *Oneing*. The encounter between God and the soul.

So, today, I want to talk about how a foundation in religion must connect us to politics in the community around us, a connection that, for us, must be grounded in the encounter between God and our soul. I call this sermon God, the Soul, and Politics.

Now, for some of you, I know that a connection between religion and politics goes against one of your values – the separation between church and state. "Separation of church and state" was first paraphrased from a letter by Thomas Jefferson and used by others in expressing an understanding of the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States which reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." In addition, Article Six of the Constitution specifies that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

Two-hundred and fifty years ago, many countries had an established religion, and the founders of our country were very specific in keeping that from happening here. I think we all have a strong appreciation for this limit. Our government inserts only minimal interference in the way we choose to practice our spirituality.

And for some of you, separation of church and state also means the reverse – the church inserts only minimal interference in the way we choose to express our politics and govern our nation. This may not be part of the U.S. Constitution, but this minimal interference is still a value held by many Christians.

It is also a value that must be close to universal for those who have no religious life for this unwritten rule minimizes the meddling from those pesky Christians. Non-church-goers want the church out of politics.

Now, U.S. tax law says that if a church advocates for or against a candidate then there can be negative tax consequences for the church. However, churches are allowed to

advocate for or against policies, and issues, and propositions. Last weekend Jeff and I joined seventy other General Convention deputies in an all day workshop which included sessions on climate change and immigration justice. Our denomination takes many stands on policies but we do it less frequently here at St. Barnabas. It is very Episcopalian to walk the middle way. We like to think of ourselves as a big tent that includes all. We like to minimize the divisiveness that can come from politics.

Part of the Biblical foundation for our avoidance of government politics is today's Gospel reading about the Roman coin. *"And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.'"*

With this passage, Jesus seems to be setting up a dualistic power structure – some things are of government and some things are of God and the two should not mix. By using this interpretation of Scripture we have been able to justify our own middle way and avoid conflict over politics.

However, there is another interpretation of this passage that puts our separation of Church and State in jeopardy. "In the same breath in which he declares that paying taxes to support secular and pagan governments is not against the will of God, Jesus goes beyond the original question asked of him. He declares that what is God's must be given to God. This is not a division of the world into two realms with two sovereigns. The kingdom of God represented and taught by Jesus embraces ALL of life. Thus, Jesus is not advocating for the separation of religion and politics. Jesus and his early followers belong to the series of Israel's prophets, who never made a split between religion and the political aspects of life. The Old Testament prophets were very political in their critique of society.

Yes, Jesus says that some things belong to the State, but through the Gospels his message is that all things belong to God. And, our ultimate loyalty must lie with God.

Over and over again the Gospels show us the reality of politics in the lives of Jesus and those around him. Many "spiritual" people prefer to separate politics from faith. It keeps things neater, happier, without any conflict. But this is not really following Jesus. And, it's not honest, either.

Jesus was constantly butting up against the power structures of two thousand years ago. Rather than trying to edit politics and the rest of everyday life out of our faith, I believe the example and the teachings of Jesus want us to come to terms with our world, as challenging as that may be. We have to start taking seriously our own

calling to stand up for those in danger and need in places like Gaza and Israel or Ukraine and Russia. We cannot and must not hide from being the hands and feet and voice of Christ in the world.

Now, in reality, there is no such thing as being non-political. Everything we say or do either affirms or critiques the status quo. Even to say nothing is to say something. Let me say that again... even to say nothing is to say something.

Last week one of you reached out to me when you had a flyer from the California Blackshirts thrown into your driveway inside a bag of sand. The flyer had a large neo-Nazi symbol and the bold title said "Diversity is not our strength. Diversity is anti-white." The flyer went on to say some pretty horrific things about people of color. The person in our church who received this flyer has people of color who live with them and are part of their family. None of the white neighbors got the flyer.

These types of threats and intimidation are a form of violence against people of color, and they are wrong. Should we stay silent? Remember lack of decision, silence, and inaction all mean something. They usually mean that the status quo is OK and doesn't need to change. When we are silent we re-enforce the way things currently are. And in our broken world, at times our silence must make Jesus weep.

Instead, we must use the power of the Gospel to critique and affirm both the Left and the Right of most public positions. And, we must always ask if our policies are consistent with the self-giving love of Jesus? Do they fit with the vision of the prophet Isaiah, that the lion would lie down with the lamb, that spears would be turned into plows, that suffering and sadness would be taken away?

Now we would be just another group jumping into the fray if we did not base our connection between religion and politics on *oneing*. Remember, this is the old English word that describes the encounter between God and the soul. We must begin with a foundation of the spiritual before connecting over into politics. Usually, however, we get this backwards. Our temptation is to begin with the politics and then try to figure out how religion can fit into it. At this point in the sermon I could start listing a bunch of social justice topics that need us. However, I don't think the list is what will get us off of our comfortable couches. Instead, I believe the best way to motivate us to action is to start with the inward journey.

We religious people are supposed to be the inner people. However, we don't always talk about the inner world very well. We have filled church-goers with proper beliefs and doctrines rather than facilitate a way to become a more loving person. And, we have become preoccupied with formalities, committees, and tradition, but remain

strangely silent about spiritual experience. Practicing rituals, and following requirements are not, in and of themselves, inner or deep.

We must refocus on spiritual practices that draw us into closer, more loving relationship with God, others and self. Traditionally, these fall into two categories. Spiritual practices of engagement include: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession and submission. And, spiritual practices of abstinence include: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice and watching. Through these spiritual practices our inward journey will take us to new, wonderful places that are centered on the love of God through Jesus.

And, then with this *oneing* we are ready to journey from our inner lives to our outer lives and meet the call of Jesus to be his hands and feet and voice in this messy world of ours. And, it is critical that as we engage with politics we bring Jesus with us.

Now, “transformative change in politics depends so much on having a clear view of the desired end. But, where does that vision come from? Possibilities may be offered by various ideologies, or party platforms, or political candidates. But, for the followers of Jesus, that vision finds its roots in God’s intended and preferred future for the world. It comes not as a dogmatic blueprint but as an experiential encounter with God’s love, flowing like a river for the healing of the nations. This biblically infused vision resonates from the Book of Genesis all the way to the Book of Revelation. It is a picture of a world made whole, with people living in beloved community, where no one is despised or forgotten, peace reigns, and the goodness of God’s creation is treasured and protected as a gift.

Such a vision strikes the political pragmatist as idyllic, unrealistic, and irrelevant. But the follower of Jesus, whose inward journey opens his or her life to the explosive love of God, knows that this vision is the most real of all. It is a glimpse of the creation’s purpose and a glimmering of the Spirit’s movement amid the world’s present pain, brokenness, and despair. This vision also recognizes the inevitable journey in which inward transformation leads to outward transformation and action.

You and I are all called to work on that inward journey and that encounter between God and our soul, and then we are called to move outward into the world to be the hands and feet and voice of Christ.