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Faith and Politics

Pentecost 5, c, July 1, 2007

Matthew 22:15-22

First, let's get straight on our terms....the definition of playing politics:

- a. to engage in political intrigue, take advantage of a political situation or issue, resort to partisan politics, etc.; exploit a political system or political relationships.
- b. to deal with people in an opportunistic, manipulative, or devious way.ⁱ

This true-to-life aspect of politics leads to all sorts of divisions and inaccurate characterizations of those who are in opposing political groups, such as this one that one of you emailed me this week after reading the sermon title in the Happenings email.

Fred Thompson and Hillary Clinton were walking down the street when they came to a homeless person.

The Republican gave the homeless person his business card and told him

to come to his office for a job. He then took \$20 out of his pocket and gave it to the homeless person. Told him to clean up and get himself a hot meal. Hillary was very impressed, so when they came to another homeless person, she decided to help. She walked over to the homeless person and gave him directions to the welfare office. She then reached into Thompson's pocket and got out \$20.

She gave the homeless person \$5 and she kept \$15 for administrative expenses.

Sometimes politics can lead to statements and jokes that border on slander.

But there is another inescapably human meaning of politics, a very positive meaning, again, from the dictionary:

!“the science or art of political government. The practice or profession of . conducting political affairs.”

And it is, indeed, a particular example of that politics that we Americans celebrate this week, a very political act that proceeded from the publication of a group of state’s representatives- politicians- who declared:

When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure

these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

That was politics, and you no doubt noted, it was and always is, infused with faith statements or at the very least, underlying faith values:

- all are created equal, endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights...
- that governments are instituted for the purpose of securing those rights, and
- that the government derives its legitimate power from the consent of the governed. Powerful faith assumptions.

This morning and I invite you to consider what we think about the relationship between politics and our Christian faith. I suggest that for the dedicated Christian there is almost always an inescapable tension between the dictates and direction of the culture that we live in, in our case the United States of America, and the call of Jesus Christ to look on our neighbors with a loving care, to act in a consistently compassionate way, to commit ourselves to always relate to one another in a respectful, honoring way.

The title of my sermon, *Faith And Politics*, is taken from a recent book written by former United States Senator John Danforth who is also an ordained Episcopal priest, entitled, Faith And Politics: How the Moral

Values Debate Divides America And How To Move Forward Together.

Senator Danforth spends the whole book talking about the ways in which faith and politics have been expressed in our nation, especially in the last century, and he bemoans the lack of civility that is now normal for the relationships between members of the two major political parties.ⁱⁱ

Senator Danforth gives examples of the good and bad and as he has seen both on the Senate floor and in back rooms as decisions are made in the governance of the American people and making of foreign-policy that affect the whole world. And in that final chapter Senator Danforth has a section where he reiterates what we know but often forget it, that no one has a corner on the market of Truth. He concludes that a great part of our problem is that our religion tells us to hold on to things powerfully and to act so as to make God's will effected in the world but, on the other hand and at the very same time, there are other people who have a similarly strong but different sense of God's direction. Danforth says that when we believe that we are the only ones who have truth, some very bad sets of relations usually develop and some very bad public policy can result.ⁱⁱⁱ

One of the examples Senator Danforth gives of someone who claimed overmuch clarity about God's desires for us is someone who came from a background that we Disciples of Christ would embrace. After all, for two years he attended our Disciples related college, Lynchburg College in Lynchburg, Virginia. As a 19 year-old he had a powerful faith conversion that impelled him into ministry. Being the first person of his family to go on to college, expectations were high and yet he was willing to subsume everything that he had previously intended for his life in order to serve

God as he understood the call. He left Lynchburg College and went on to Baptist Bible College in Springfield, MO where he graduated in 1956.

The young man went on to become one the most visible Christian leaders in U.S. until his death 6 weeks ago on May 15, 2007. Of course, the man I am describing was the pastor of the 24,000 member Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Rev. Jerry Falwell.

The day after his death, the NY Times wrote:

With his outspoken pronouncements on matters moral, political and religious, Falwell became not only one of the most polarizing religious figures in America but also one of the most powerful. ...As much as anyone, Falwell helped create the religious right as a political force, defined the issues that would energize it for decades and cemented its ties to the Republican Party....” (PAUSE)

We might characterize Falwell’s stance as the very anchor of American Christianity’s right wing by seeing it as a readiness to trust his own interpretation of God’s will over any body else’s, to multiply his own frustration with the culture’s direction in his followers, calling them to join him an increasingly combative stance that over the years led him to frequent political statements, to political lobbying, to legal actions against numbers of people, to shrewd manipulation of the media.

And though many of us here would have grave problems with Falwell’s particular understanding of God’s will, and would most likely find ourselves in the lists of those categories of people that he thought God could not abide, let me say that on at least very central point, we should all admire him.

It is in that very willingness to trust one's own spiritual insight over every other faculty, every other influence, every other cultural teaching, that also describes truly great and faithful figures: Sarah & Abraham, Moses, the ancient Hebrew prophets, Mary, Jesus, Paul of Tarsus, Martin Luther and John Calvin, all the way to the modern era's Martin Luther King Jr.. All these had in common that above ALL ELSE, they chose their directions based on their personal understandings of God's direction. God's will remained the first concern.

Recall Jesus' response to the Pharisees and the Herodians:

19 Show me the coin used for the tax." 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."

The Pharisees and Herodians were mightily impressed with this response, but I imagine the Disciples on the sidelines, giggling with delight. They'd been with Jesus long enough to understand what Jesus' REALLY meant:

What is God's? The mountains, the trees? Creatures of the air and sea? Human beings? Are we God's? Of course we are! **Everything is God's.** Everything is intended to be in harmony with an overarching kingdom of which is beneficent ruler.

You see, I think this is Jesus' point here, that his disciples would have understood, was that when you give to God what IS God's....

- there is nothing left for the Emperor.

- There is nothing left for the government of the United States or any other government.
- There is nothing left for friends or our families.
- There is nothing left to set aside for personal aggrandizement and pleasure...

When we give to God what is God's, OUR VERY SELVES, every other allegiance, every other love, every other commitment is on a second tier. Every other commitment we would make must either nestle properly within our overall sense of God's will, or – in faithfulness- we must determine to change that which resists God's will.

Again with yesterday's attack at the Glasgow Airport, the great and proper concern that religious moderates, that religious liberals, and secular people rightly hold in our age is that the religious fundamentalists - Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or any other - will without negotiation and without any sensitivity to others, move to eliminate any resistance to their vision of the kingdom of God, whether that vision is expressed by Hamas, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Likud, or the right wing of the Southern Baptist Convention.

We start by being clear about our own perspective. Let me suggest that if Jesus is correct, that everything is God's, then government should only be obeyed to the degree that it does not interfere with God's will. There will be times that in good conscience Christians must not support the government of their country if it is clearly inconsistent with God's will. Cooperating with an intransigent Nazi regime in Germany, an apartheid regime in South Africa, or a genocidal regime annihilating Darfur is inconsistent with God's unrestricted love for **all** people. There are times when Christian faith says that a whole regime is clearly

illegitimate – not on the same basis as our American revolutionary forbearers suggested, since a democratic basis for community life was unknown in biblical days- but the regime is illegitimate because it defies the humane and compassionate character that God has always required of all governments.

But once we find ourselves in a nation with a legitimate governance – as we are blessed with here and now- a government that is dealing with the decisions more typical; decisions that reside in shades of gray rather than clear black and white, there must be another ethic... also on the second tier... underneath one's commitment to God, but one that is still powerful, one that can commit us to ongoing, respectful dialogue with those whose values may be very different from our own.

And proof that this is possible sometimes comes from the most unsuspected quarters. Many of you will remember that the pornographic magazine Hustler was sued by Jerry Falwell in 1983 when it published a clearly fake interview with Falwell that purported to tell his sexual history. Strong, even mean spirited exchanges ensued between Falwell and Hustler's editor, Larry Flynt. The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme court in 1988 where Hustler won. In real world relationships one would expect that to be the end of the story.

But just a few days ago after the death of Falwell, Larry Flynt released a comment regarding his relationship with Falwell. He said:

"My mother always told me that no matter how much you dislike a person, when you meet them face to face you will find characteristics about them that you like. Jerry Falwell was a perfect example of that. I hated everything he

stood for, but after meeting him in person, years after the trial, Jerry Falwell and I became good friends. He would visit me in California and we would debate together on college campuses. I always appreciated his sincerity even though I knew what he was selling and he knew what I was selling."

If after all their history and all their differences in belief, even Flynt and Falwell could civilly speak, perhaps the prospects of the ministry of reconciliation we are given in Jesus Christ is brighter than we have imagined.

Let us Pray:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace,^{iv}
 Where there is hatred, let us bring your love
 Where there is injury, pardon,
 And where there is doubting, let us bring your faith.
 Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Amen.

ⁱ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/politics>

ⁱⁱ Cut from the final version of the sermon here was the following:

Senator Danforth makes a marvelous case, especially in the final chapter the books when he uses the 12th chapter of the Book of Romans as a yardstick by which the nation and particularly our political leaders should relate to one another in their high responsibility of governing.

--From verse 2 he emphasizes "do not be conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

-- From verse 16, "Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all".

--And from verse 21, "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good."

ⁱⁱⁱ *Faith and Politics*, John Danforth

^{iv} This prayer is obviously reliant on St. Francis' prayer