

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, I always try to keep my comments to less than two-thirds of what would be a normal sermon, about two-hours rather than my usual three, but today is a challenge because . . . well, in case you have not noticed, politics is in full battle — and I choose that term intentionally — in full battle mode.

And ouch. It is really a bit less than nineteen years since I abandoned being hyper-active in politics myself; it was twenty years ago last month that I threw up my hands and decided God wanted me elsewhere, and I did not quit politics my first year in seminary, but I have some very fond memories of, if not outright *friendships*, than *camaraderie*, that crossed party lines when I was active. In one case, it was with a key member of the staff of a man I hoped to run against; in others, it was with legislators and other office holders from the other party. We had differences of opinion, but shared something.

Shared something, and I cannot put my finger on exactly what it was, perhaps a belief in the other person's fundamental goodness and well-meaning intent despite his or her wacky policy and political beliefs or candidates; it was a belief that the person was more than the party or part of the political spectrum he or she called home.

Of course, that was largely before MSNBC and Fox News, neither of which I seek outright to condemn nor praise, and that was when, though Rush Limbaugh was already a national figure, talk radio did not dominate, and anonymously verbally assassinating people over the Internet had not taken root.

Now, however, not only are we as citizens, most of us, of the US so sharply divided politically that we fail to see the fundamental American belief in the other, but we as Christians and most certainly we in mainline denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church USA, are divided as much on political as theological grounds. (Which is truly odd in the Presbyterian Church where we look to John Calvin, a neo-Platonist who believed in learning things through discussion with those with a different perspective.) A look at the actions of a General Assembly of the PCUSA will prove my point on that.

And that should not be!

And I have two things to support what I say, both of which arise from today's Scriptures.

Let me start with the Gospel passage from Mark, for which, though I used a more modern translation, the King James Version contains the gist of a famous quote from Lincoln: "*If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.*" Christ's Church can readily tolerate differences of opinion on political issues, but it cannot allow itself to be *divided* by them; if you doubt me, look at what has happened to the membership of mainline Protestant churches. Being divided along political lines is far from the only reason that Christianity is losing adherents, but it is one of them.

But what is really upsetting about allowing politics to divide us is that there was warning almost 3000 years ago! As I have taught in Bible Study, one of the most important of those humans whose "inspired" — and please do not ask me to define that term — whose inspired writings comprise the Hebrew Bible was "J," the man — literary critic Harold Bloom argued for J's being a woman, it does not matter to me, so let me say — the *writer* we call the *Yahwist* because he or she used the Hebrew letter equivalents to *YHWH* for the name of God. (The "J" comes from the German pronunciation which gave us the name, "Jehovah.") The Yahwist wrote large parts of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers and all the way into 1 Samuel, from which today's Hebrew Bible/Old Testament reading comes.

And the part of that reading that I wish to emphasize is this: although the Yahwist most probably wrote during the reign of the greatest king, David, or his son, Solomon, according to the reading, God would have preferred that the Israelites *not* have a king, not have a "governing executive" because of all the ways in which they would regret it, which were spelled out:

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹² and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵ He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶ He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷ He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸ And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

Am I jumping to conclusions, or does God know something about the failures of the humans whom God has created? And substitute for “King” either “state” or “government,” and, while I am not going to argue that God is a libertarian, we had warnings that state and government are something of which to be leery, things necessary but either intrinsically corrupt or intrinsically corrupting, in neither case worthy of worship and adulation, which then raises the question:

“How can we let politics divide the Earthly Body of Christ?”

Government and politics are at best compromises with idealism, at worst what we call “necessary evils”; they most definitely are not God’s preferred way of bringing us together or conforming us to God’s will.

Politics is secondary, and a distantly secondary, to what God wants of the people of God. Neither agreement nor disagreement on politics goes to the core of what it means to be a Christian!

And my source for this outrageous statement? Let us return to our Gospel lesson and its challenging but clear final words:

³³ He replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' ³⁴ And looking at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. ³⁵ Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'

Jesus does not identify his brothers and sisters by their proclamations or platforms, but by their deeds, *Anyone who does the will of God.*

As we gather at his table, let us seek to be true to God's will first and put aside political platforms and candidates and philosophies for what really matters: The Love of God made known in Christ; for Christ present with each of us, no matter our politics, as we celebrate the Sacrament he shared with his first followers.