

EVE OF ASCENSION OF OUR LORD | MAY 20, 2023

PSALM 47 | LUKE 24:44-53

We have a baptism and confirmation tomorrow, which is great. And it also means that I have a homily prepped which isn't going to be of much interest to you. So I thought I'd talk about something you thought was interesting. And this week, someone sent me a really interesting thing this week, which I want to try to unpack a little bit. And the question is: How do I become an informed citizen and strive to understand both sides of an issue while retaining my values and religious beliefs?

I think this person is pointing out an interesting tension. That on the one hand, we have core theological commitments that affect how we engage the world. For example, our social statement on race, ethnicity, and culture states that “racism—a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice—is sin, a violation of God’s intention for humanity.”¹ This is not something that we can just “agree to disagree” on or “see both sides” on. So when this person talks about retaining my values, I think this is what they’re getting at.

There are also some issues of public concern in which we may agree on a broad principle but disagree on how to meet that principle. We may agree that it’s important to address housing instability, but we may have different perspectives over the most effective ways to provide housing to people. There may be—and, in fact, are—a bunch of sides to this issue. And as this person alludes to, it would be comical to print off a white paper on zoning reform from Brookings or New America and make it a kind of litmus test for faithful discipleship.

So you understand the tension. And obviously, I’m not going to solve this in ten minutes. But I want to give you a couple ways to think about it.

One way to approach these questions of public life is by examining how we relate to other people. There’s an interesting word that this person used in the question, which is “citizen.” Citizenship is an important way to think about public life. And oftentimes, we frame our debates over public life in terms of citizenship. What’s the phrase the president always starts speeches with? *My fellow Americans*.

But when you get into the New Testament, you see relatively little concern with citizenship. St. Paul uses the word twice, and both times he uses it, he immediately reframes it and says, “Yea, but I’m using it differently than you think I am.” The category that comes up more often in the New Testament is the neighbor. And there’s a very important difference between the two. Citizenship is a legal category determined by the government. Neighbors is a theological category created by God. In fact, in today’s gospel reading you notice that the constituency the church is called to serve isn’t just a small group of citizens or members but “all nations.” Those are your neighbors. This is what we mean when we call the church catholic. It exists to serve everyone.

And that reframes our sense of “us” in a slightly different way. It expands our range of concern and responsibility beyond people we have an immediate legal connection with. I know I’ve shared this before, but a number of years ago, I was watching the news, and there

¹ “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture.” 1993. Available at elca.org under the “Social Statements” area.

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was a segment on about people claiming asylum at the southern border. And the segment is framed as Americans and migrants, citizens and non-citizens, us and them. And because I'm so conditioned to this, I'm just going along with it in my head. And then they cut to show a group of migrants in a park with a priest celebrating mass. And all of a sudden, your brain sort of snaps out of it and you remember that these are my neighbors. And in our teaching on the sacraments, when we receive communion every Saturday, we're receiving it with them.

That "neighbor" concept doesn't give you a neat policy solution to every problem. But it expands our range of empathy a bit as we encounter others. The people we are responsible for caring and serving are not simply the members of our congregation or people who live in our neighborhoods or people who are citizens of the same country as us but everyone who bears the image of God. And while we may be constrained in our ability to serve and care because of our own limitations, there is never an excuse for dehumanizing or scapegoating others. As our social message on civic engagement puts it, "we may disagree about the best ways to achieve the public good, we do not disagree about our shared responsibility to seek it."²

Another way to think about this is through the lens of vocation. There's an interesting book that came out a couple of years ago by a political scientist at Tufts named Eitan Hersch called *Politics is for Power*. And it's about what he calls "political hobbyism." What he means by that is "spending significant time and energy on politics, but without serious purpose."³ So lots of time and energy consuming news and arguing with people on social media, but less time and energy actually organizing, advocating, or working for something. Hobbyism is based on the belief that real power to make change lies somewhere else, and that we are just spectators. In public life, we're not on the court, we're just in the bleachers rooting for our team.

Our concept of vocation gives us a way out of getting stuck in hobbyism. Because it says that God empowers us to love our neighbors from all of our stations in life. We're not just watching from the bleachers, but we're in the game. When we are baptized, we are given Christ's mission of loving and serving the world. And when we're sent from worship every week, that's what we're being sent to do. You're not being sent to dinner, you're being sent to love and serve and bear God's redeeming word to all the world. Because we've been given Jesus's mission—that's what today's gospel reading is about—we can always live and act with serious purpose.

² "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy." 2020. Available at elca.org under the "Social Messages" area.

³ For our purposes, politics is about how society distributes power and resources. Partisanship is about aligning with political parties or actors. The church is engaged in politics insofar as it engages in action around the distribution of resources and power, but we don't endorse political parties or candidates. You can opt out of partisan activity, but you can't opt out of political action because such "opting out" is itself a decision about how power and resources should be distributed. To take the obvious example, sitting out the 1960s civil rights movement because you don't want to get involved in politics is an extremely political decision.

Participation in civic life is one of the many ways that we live out our vocations in the world.⁴ We love our neighbors when we give them food and housing and clothing. We love our neighbors when we vote and call our representatives and protest against injustice. We love our neighbors when we care for a family member or the person who lives next door.

In N.T. Wright's book *Surprised by Hope*, this is how he sums it up. I've read this before, but it's good, so I'm reading it again. He writes, "What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future... They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom."

That's the task that the risen and ascended Christ makes our responsibility and the mission that the Holy Spirit empowers all of us to fulfill.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁴ Saying that government is a "gift" doesn't mean that it is Christian or that it can't act unjustly. It simply means that government is how we order society to protect and support one another when individual actions would be insufficient or impossible.