

Sermon

July 5, 2015

Happy 4<sup>th</sup> of July!

How do you feel about politics? It seems that the last two weeks have had more than the usual amount of political news. Some have even called it historic, though how it is historic varies depending on the people speaking. My more progressive friends have been pretty happy lately with the Supreme Court in particular—maintaining the Affordable Care Act despite some problems with the wording of the legislation; and granting marriage equality for gay and lesbian people after many years of their struggle for that right.

Of course my more conservative friends are less happy, at least for the most part. Some bemoan what they see as Constitutional malpractice, regardless of practical necessity. Others anticipate more dire consequences. Some go so far as predicting the end of the republic. If you keep up with Facebook and have a diversity of “friends” there, real or virtual, it has been a colorful week.

Another question-- How do you feel about politics from the pulpit? Many people I know are uncomfortable with that, even if the preacher is saying what they agree with. And depending on the topic, there could even be issues with tax-exempt status (mainly this applies to direct endorsement of a party or candidate). I admit I struggle with this as a former parishioner and now as a preacher.

For many years, I sat under the preaching of a man I respect. At times he would challenge me in an area of justice/politics that would lead me to deeper introspection and even repentance. At other times, I believe he would cross the line, the party line, to advocating a position when there were multiple facts and facets that a fifteen or even thirty minute sermon could not explore. After all, a sermon is one way for the most part; no Q&A, no give and take, no footnotes. Some issues are better addressed in a forum when everyone is able to have a conversation. That is what we did during our Lenten series on race.

But as a preacher, I do believe we have a role in the political process, especially for people of faith. From the Hebrew prophets hundreds of years

before the time of Christ, to John the Baptist, his immediate forerunner, to Jesus himself, preachers speak on issues that fall within the political process. That is part of what we're called to do. Our faith is about more than individual morality or spirituality. If we call ourselves Christian, we need to reflect on what Jesus would say about an issue if we are truly following him.

Part of what I have to say about politics is about process—how we work and talk together to seek justice in our republic. I believe that is the greatest challenge we face—folks seem to not like each other if we disagree about an issue. We call each other names. We question each other's motives. There is hyperbole. We use the "E" word, calling other citizens or even other Christians evil because they disagree with our view. In the extreme, we make comparisons between our opponents and some great tyrant like Hitler.

This approach cuts off conversation much less relationship. It is nearly impossible when we follow this type of process to find any common ground. Political leaders and even church leaders throw out what is called "red meat" to their base. The best we can hope for, it seems, is a steady diet of snide comments that build ill will and increase suspicion between groups.

So what is the alternative? There *are* serious issues that divide people in this land. As someone said at our Wednesday prayer service on June 24<sup>th</sup>, a lot of folks are not ready to sit down and sing "Kumbayah." Is there another way besides artificial and premature niceness or our current state of hostility and alienation? I think so. The answer is found in an old fashion word that we rarely use today—*forbearance*. The dictionary describes *forbearance* as "patient self-control; restraint and tolerance." Here is what it means for me in our political life:

If you want to see something changed in our common life, a skill you will need to master is patience. It is a hard skill. Perhaps it is not fair that activists have to be patient. Especially when you think you are right, that your cause is just, patience may feel like compromise or even selling out. But patience is needed for at least two reasons—first, your patient explanation and demonstration of the issues you are fighting to change will help you to win over undecided people and even people that might initially oppose you. And second, to force change too fast in order to accomplish your goals, may create other

even worse problems. Patience, forbearance, changes the environment so that change is sustainable.

The best example of this is the American civil rights movement. In the 1950's and 1960's, people prayed and planned and worked politically and through protests to change great injustice in our country. Black folks, despite the guarantees of our Constitution, did not have equal rights around such foundational issues as voting, housing, education, and employment. It was crazy and unjust and widely accepted as just the way it is. But they changed it with patience and courage and wisdom; and with God's help and right on their side.

The other part of forbearance applies to people who are resisting change, people usually known as conservatives. Forbearance for conservatives means to be open. Simply that—open. Open to facts that are different from what you assume. Open to relationships that could put a human face on an issue. Open to solutions that might make you uncomfortable; but that could also bring justice to our nation. And being open needs always to be two way—people advocating for change and people working to preserve what exists now need to be open to facts and relationships and proposals going both ways. That is how just and enduring change can occur for the good of all.

So I believe an old fashioned practice of forbearance is needed in our political debates. Pray for it, practice it, and call for it from our leaders. Forbearance is sorely lacking in our public discourse. We need it if we ever hope to change our direction and the quality of our common life.

But to be clear, forbearance is not the same as apathy or complacency. Another part of what we need in our political life is passion. This may seem to be the opposite of what I just said, but it isn't. Those leaders and workers within the civil rights movement practiced patience and passion. They did know from firsthand experience and their biblical faith that their cause was just and that the system they were resisting was wrong, deeply wrong. That passion inspired them and kept them going in the face of violence and jail and even death. That passion also gave them the strength to be patient.

Depending on our political party or perspective, different things may inspire passion in us. But as a Christian, as an Episcopalian, there are certain things we pledge to work for each time someone is baptized (like little Mac last

week). The last question and response in our baptismal covenant provides the framework for our political life—“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? I will with God’s help.” It raises a question we must answer if we are to stay true to what we have agreed to do as baptized people.

That question and our pledged answer will guide us if we take time to listen—listen to our hearts, to one another, and to God. Even if we disagree on the answers, that promise to respect the dignity of every human being should guide how we pursue the debate and what actions we agree to take together.

So I am approaching the limits of what I can offer, one way from the pulpit. But I am committed to further conversations with you as individuals and in groups or even in a parish wide forum. I want give and take and Q & A to help guide what we do. The path I seek to follow is forbearance—that is patience and an open mind—to speak up and to listen and to assume good will. The spirit I hope we share is a passion for justice and peace and human dignity. I can think of no higher values for us to pursue. And if we do, I believe we will find issues we can work on together regardless of our prior personal politics.

Amen.