

Romans 13:1-5 + John 18:31-35

***On politics and Christian practice***

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It's summer and a holiday weekend and the children have just delighted us with singing. And now I'm going to give this sermon that might not be as light. So let me try this joke on you. "Jesus said 'When 2 or 3 are gathered together in my name, I am with them.' I wonder what he would have said if he knew one was a Republican, one was a Democrat, and one was a Libertarian. (Okay, sorry; I'm not that good at jokes.)

Actually I really am puzzled when people want to separate politics from Christian practice. I'm puzzled because it was politics that brought me back the Church that I had abandoned years before as a racist institution. It's also puzzling because the effort to separate politics from Christian practice is impossible. If we think of politics as the ordering of public life toward moral ends that sustain human flourishing and guard against human evil, then nearly everything one does has a political impact. From the clothes I wear to the food I eat; from the taxes I pay to the way I vote (or not) has an impact on the public order, which makes these decisions political. The great reformer John Calvin understood this as well as anyone. He brought his legal skills together with his theological insight and devout faith with a vision to make Geneva the city of God. That vision ultimately failed but Calvin's understanding of the role of the Christian in public life carried on through his Presbyterian followers, including those who came to America during the revolution whose victory we celebrate tomorrow.

King George III once described the American Revolution as that *pesky Presbyterian rebellion*. Presbyterians earned that description because of their conviction that Christian practice required resistance to political authorities who, in their judgment, undermined the will of God. They gained this conviction from a reading of scripture, including Jesus and Israel's prophets, and especially Romans 13 where Saint Paul describes authorities as instruments of God – until they are not. Determining when the authorities have forsaken the divine role given to them has also been an act of careful and often difficult discernment and political engagement. The decision of Presbyterians to engage in the American Revolution was no small decision. It was an act of faith and political resistance that including overthrowing the God given authority who in their judgment had forsaken that divine obligation. More Presbyterians signed the Declaration of Independence than any other religious body. On the eve of the celebration of Independence, it's important for American Christians to remember our history lest we forget how important it is for the Church to be engaged in public life for the well being of society.

Thomas Jefferson was quite reticent to be called a Christian and certainly gave no allegiance to the Bible. Saint Paul was certainly not on his list of mentors. Yet Jefferson's conviction about the separation of Church and State has influenced American society and political debate more than any other. **What Jefferson intended was the flourishing of religious life unfettered by the State.** The public square would be inhabited by religious voices alongside non-religious

ones, exercising freedom and debating the common good. **It was never the intent that religious faith would be sequestered into a private, inner life; sequestered in a corner singing our hymns and praying our prayers, leaving the State unfettered from the criticism of religious voices. That debate in the public square about the common good still rages and thoughtful Christians must be a part of it, alongside Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists and agnostics.**

When Hitler succeeded in co-opting the established German church, some – very few - Christians publically resisted. The very few became known as the confessing Church, issuing the Barmen Declaration declaring Jesus Christ to be the only Lord and pledging their allegiance to Christ above all other. Hitler declared them illegal and arrested most of them who had already not left the country. Hitler executed most of the rest of them before he took his own life in an act of cowardice both political and personal.

**As I mentioned the practice of politics is what brought me back to the Church and specifically the Presbyterian Church.** Years ago when I was in college, the Supreme Court restored the death penalty to the states. I did not agree with this decision then or now, and consider the death penalty contrary to Christian practice. But the state of Florida disagreed with me, and many others, who stood at the gates of the state prison protesting this decision. We later occupied the governor's office and chained ourselves to the fence to no avail. The state of Florida executed John Spink for his crime. John's mother, Lois, was a poor woman who came from a Pentecostal/Baptist church tradition. She asked several congregations to provide a funeral for her son and they all refused. She kept asking around with no success. Finally she came to the wealthy, mostly white First Presbyterian Church across from the Florida Capital where the pastors and session had been publically active in resisting the death penalty. It was not a familiar faith community for her, but having failed to secure a funeral for her son she asked them and, they said yes without hesitation. Two days later, the sanctuary was filled with over 500 people and governor was present across the street. She wrote of letter of gratitude for the kindness offered by the session.

This public act of mercy and compassion toward the poor and the broken was, for me, a stunning public witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ for sinners. I asked to join the congregation and returned to the Presbyterian tradition of my birth. A few years later I was elected an elder and then sent off to seminary to be a pastor with the session's blessing. If it weren't for their public political witness my life may have gone in a different direction. The congregation still holds public prayer vigils in the Capital rotunda on behalf of those in death row.

When Jesus stood before Pilate it was a political moment of truth; Pilate knew it even if he feigned knowing the Truth who stood before him. They both knew that his death would have public political consequences. And we dare not forget that his execution was a political act by the Roman Empire. His cross stands a public and very political proclamation of God's grace and mercy toward the world that crucified him.

Our society is undergoing enormous change and facing important challenges. Christians must be a public witness in practice, in politics and in prayer. The well being of our nation is at stake.