

Second Sunday after Pentecost (6-6-2021)

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." Jesus said these words when he was accused of using demonic power to cast out demons. It was an accusation made by the scribes, the legal experts who were aligned with the political establishment in Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry was threatening the political establishment. As a matter of fact, he compared himself rather shockingly to a thief who binds up the strongman in order to plunder his house. And it was an image of his attack on the powers that be, on the powers of evil, that he felt were dominating the society in his time.

Even Jesus' family was threatened by his ministry and his behavior. When people thought he was crazy his family was ashamed. They tried to stop him from continuing his work. Just imagine what would have happened if Jesus had let his family do that and had been silenced because they were ashamed.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." Abraham Lincoln famously used these words in 1858 to describe the situation in the United States before the Civil War. It was a country divided over the question of slavery.

That house divided description fits our current situation, too, wouldn't you say? It is a deeply divided nation. And just as there was against Jesus, there is a lot of name calling and false accusations going on by all sides. There is division within the church. Not just between branches of Christianity or denominations, but within just about every congregation. And there are divided families alienated from each other; families who can barely talk to each other anymore because they are so divided over politics.

I think the reaction of many of us is -- shouldn't we just focus on living our lives and ignore the political situation? Can't we at least stay out of politics at church? Can't this be a safe place where we just focus on God and don't have to think about the outside world?

Well, politics has been an issue for God's people from the beginning. Look at this story in First Samuel today. Samuel was a judge, a prophet, and a priest, and he had been serving as a leader for the people of Israel, and it was a time that I like to think of as being a lot like our Wild West -- at least the Wild West of myth. Whenever a need arose,

whenever the situation got out of hand, they got up a posse with a local sheriff and dealt with it.

That's a lot like life was during the period of the judges. But the people were tired of that. And they came to Samuel and said, look, Samuel, you're fine, OK, whatever, but your sons aren't. And we want to have some stability. We want to have a king like other nations do. We want a leader we can count on to lead us into war. Why can't we just be like the other nations? And God says, all right, Samuel. Warn the people what it will be like. And did you notice how much that warning sounds like a condemnation of excessive taxation and government overreach? I know.

God describes their demand as a rejection of God's rule over them and says, be careful what you ask for. You might just get it. But God gives into their demand and gives them a king. But what our text doesn't tell us today is that God sets up a system that holds the king accountable to God. So, this is not an absolute monarch. This is a monarch who is anointed by God and accountable by God. And the God who sets up a king can also take down a king.

But what does that all have to do with us today? We don't have a monarchy. We live in a democracy. But putting God first is inherently a political act, because politics have to do with our life together in community, and our faith calls us to live together as community, and to care about every member of our society and how every member of our society is treated. So, our faith is inherently political, but the gospel of Jesus Christ is not partisan.

Sojourners put out a bumper sticker that said, God is not a Republican or a Democrat. I really like that. Not even in here, no, God is not a Republican or a Democrat, and Republicans and Democrats are both welcome at worship, as are independents and every flavor, green, whatever, because we as human beings can look at the same situation and interpret it differently. And there has to be room for conversation, for disagreement, for learning. We must be humble about our own rightness.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to question every political authority, every political party, every political position, to hold it up for examination against the call of God. We

are called to hold every authority and law accountable to God's will for the world. That is deeply part of our faith.

Now, the tension for us, as it was for Jesus, is that sometimes our faith and our deepest convictions bump up against the powers that be. They call us to challenge political systems. I mean, what kind of politics do we see in biblical law and in Jesus words and actions? One of the first things we see is that Jesus includes people. Jesus includes people who historically have been excluded and mistreated such as foreigners, immigrants, people of color. And today we might think, as this is pride month, of the LGBTQ community. We see the early church in Acts including a eunuch who would have been a person whose gender was not the norm. And we see Isaiah addressing those kinds of questions, too. This is a politics that includes people. We see Jesus practicing care for sick people, old people and poor people, making sure that they are provided for. Throughout Scripture we see a call for a just distribution of wealth. I challenge you to look up money in a concordance. It is one of the most frequently mentioned words in scripture. It might surprise you, but it's true.

The Bible talks a lot about money and what we do with it, because money affects how people live. It affects whether they have the basic necessities. And money so easily becomes an idol for us. We become more focused on accruing more of it than we do on caring for each other.

What we see Jesus and all of scripture holding up is that love of God and love of neighbor are the first and most important commandments. And justice is love built into legal structures. It is a system that ensures loving behavior. That is the goal of a just system. And so, we as Christians, we as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to ask ourselves how is love embodied in law? Is love embodied in our current laws? Or are our laws unloving and unjust? What do we need to change?

And people of faith can disagree about the answers to those questions. People of faith do disagree about the answers to those questions. It might surprise you to know that not every position I hold aligns with the Democratic Party. I suspect that for many of you if you went through position by position, would find that there are places where you're not in alignment with whatever party you vote for, because our allegiance to our political parties is not our first allegiance. Our first allegiance is to God. And when we get too

partisan, we forget that we are called to love first; to love, to listen to each other, to listen -- shock -- to those who disagree with us, to listen to those who are offended by us, who are hurt by what we've said, to learn from their hurt. And maybe to change our behavior in response to their hurt.

Because what are we called to do first? Love God, love neighbor. Right? And then our call constantly is to see, how do we live that love out in the world? Our faith must be political because our faith is about love in the world, not just love in a little bubble, not just love for our families, but love in the world. How do we live that out?

I don't know if you know this, but the Lord's Prayer is at the heart of every single Episcopal service. There's not a service in the prayer book from Eucharist to morning prayer to prayers for individuals and families, to our prayers for the dead, that doesn't include the Lord's Prayer. And think about the words of the Lord's Prayer. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven," what are we asking? That's a political prayer. Will we let God's kingdom come in our own lives, in our own political decisions, in the way we live with each other? When we pray that, do we mean that in all its implications? I invite you to consider in all your relationships and in your politics, in your voting, in the way you are with family and friends, how will you let God's love reign in your life today? How will you embody God's reign in the world?