



Vote for Jesus



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

October 7, 2018
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"
Mark 7:24

Whenever I read the Gospels, I always feel sorry for the Pharisees. The Pharisees often come across as the "bad guys," the ones who oppose Jesus at every turn, and yet, the Pharisees weren't really bad guys at all. The Pharisees were actually good people, with good hearts, who were devoted to God and serious about their faith. In many ways, the Pharisees wanted exactly what Jesus wanted – to bring people into a closer relationship with God, to have people experience God's presence in their lives. It's just the Pharisees and Jesus had different ideas on how to accomplish that.

The Pharisees believed the key to a deeper connection with God was in living life strictly according to the Law, the Torah, which was given to the Jewish people by Moses and passed down from generation to generation. Every aspect of human life was covered under the Law, right down to the smallest of details. Much of the Torah actually concerned eating – what you could eat and couldn't eat, how the food should be prepared, who you could eat with and when. The Pharisees were devoted to following every one of these rules because, for them, it was not just about physical hygiene, it was about spiritual hygiene. The world was full of germs that were contagious and dangerous, not so much for your body but for your soul. Physical illness was a sign of spiritual sickness. If someone was ill, or suffered from some sort of disease, it meant they had sinned in some way, and those sinners had germs, which you could catch and which would infect you. Just having dirty hands implied you had a dirty heart,¹ and it's not like you could wash that dirt away with a little soap and water. That wouldn't do it. It wasn't enough. To cleanse your soul of dirt, to wash away your sin, required a lengthy purification process.

That all sounds strange to you and me, but the Pharisees took it very seriously. So, you can understand why the Pharisees were upset when Jesus and the disciples began plucking grain on the Sabbath,² sitting down to dinner with tax collectors and sinners,³ eating without washing their hands.⁴ From the Pharisee's point of view, Jesus and the disciples weren't living according to the Law. They weren't following the Jewish tradition, doing what they were supposed to do. For the Pharisee's, Jesus and the disciples were practicing bad faith.

But, Jesus saw things differently. For Jesus, a deeper relationship with God didn't come from living strictly by the Law. A deep and abiding connection with God came from living by the spirit of the Law. God gave the Torah to the Jewish people to govern them in their relationships with each other and with God. The Law was about how to relate to one another, how people should treat each other and interact with each other, and for Jesus, those relationships centered on love and compassion and forgiveness. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul. And, love your neighbor as yourself. That was the spirit of the Law, the summary of the Law.

Jesus and the Pharisees just saw things differently. They both wanted essentially the same thing, had basically the same goal, but they just had different approaches to achieving that goal. It's no wonder, then, that Jesus and the Pharisees often butted heads. Whenever they came into contact, they would argue and debate, with the Pharisees always questioning Jesus and testing Jesus, hoping he would say something they could use against him. In this morning's Gospel, the debate was over divorce. Another time, the issue was taxes. The Pharisees

1. Barbara Brown Taylor
2. Mark 2:23
3. Mark 2:15
4. Mark 7:2

and Jesus would go back and forth, and back and forth, with the Pharisees never really listening to what Jesus had to say, never really understanding the point he was trying to make, and the people all around them had to listen and decide: Who do we believe? Who should we follow? The Pharisees? Or, Jesus?

The situation reminds me of the current political climate in this country. In case you haven't heard, Democrats and Republicans don't get along very well. All they do is talk at each other, or over each other. They constantly test the other side, and question the other side, hoping the other side will say something that can be used against them. Democrats and Republicans want essentially the same thing – they want to move this country forward – but they have different ideas and beliefs on how to do that. So, the two parties are constantly butting heads on tax reform, health care, immigration, Supreme Court nominees. Instead of coming together in a bipartisan way in order to make things better for all of us, the two parties seem to be moving farther apart. Instead of participating in a thoughtful and respectful give-and-take in hopes of finding some sort of common ground and compromise, all they do is engage in name-calling, and finger pointing, and casting blame on the other side.

The good news is: in this country, we get to choose which party to follow and support, because we get to vote. Every two years, we're able to weigh the issues, listen to the candidates, and then, decide: Democrat, Republican, or someone else, which has me wondering – how will your Christian faith inform your decision? How will your relationship with God, and your understanding of who Jesus was and what Jesus was all about, affect your vote this fall?

Many people believe that faith and politics don't mix, that we shouldn't talk about elections here in church. It violates the separation between church and state, some say. Clergy shouldn't tell us for whom to vote, others say. While I completely understand those points of view, the idea of a separation between church and state, as articulated in the 1st Amendment, was to provide each of us with the right to our own religious beliefs, not to prevent our religious beliefs from informing our political decisions. And, I promise: I'm not going to tell you for which candidates to vote for – I would never do that; and, I hope you know I would never do that.

What I am going to tell you, though, is your Christian faith should most definitely play a role in your politics, and more specifically, in your decision for whom to vote, because before you were a Republican or Democrat, before you were a member of the Tea Party or Green Party, you were a child of God, and you were a member of God's party. Your relationship with God goes back to before you were born, back to when you were only a glimmer in God's imagination, and that relationship should inform every single thing you do, right down to and including your politics.

As much as we might like to, we can't separate our faith and politics. The two will always mix together and should mix together, in our hearts and in our minds, because faith and politics clearly mix in the heart and mind of God. All we have to do is look at the Bible. Like politics, the Bible addresses fundamental questions about community – who belongs and who doesn't, how it's organized, who its leaders are and how they should be selected. In the Old Testament, God confronts Pharaoh, the political big-wig of his time. In the New Testament, Jesus took on the Pharisees and scribes, the Chief Priests and Roman authorities. God was always involved in politics, from the beginning of the Bible to the end, because God cares about politics. There's no doubt about it.

But, God is not partisan. God is not a Republican or a Democrat. God's politics remind us of the people our politics forgets – the poor and the vulnerable; those left out and those left behind. God's politics challenge narrow our national, ethnic, and economic self-interests, reminding us of a much wider world and of our responsibility to care for each other and love each other, because, when it comes right down to it, we're all part of the same family. We're all part of God's family. And, therefore, in God's politics, every single issue is a spiritual issue. Health care is a spiritual issue. How we look after immigrants is a spiritual issue. How we treat women is a spiritual issue. How we decide to spend our money and allocate our resources is a spiritual issue. And so, who we vote for is a spiritual issue, because it's all about how we care for each other and love each other.⁵

5. Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*

Over the next month, as you think about the issues, the candidates, and casting your vote, I invite you, and I encourage you to pray. Usually, at election time, we think of prayer as a way to get God on our side and get the outcome we want: “Please, God, let her win” or “Please, God, whatever you do, don’t let HER win.” But, that’s not what I am talking about! Prayer is the way in which we open ourselves to God. Through prayer, our thoughts and desires, our hearts and souls, are transformed by God to be more in line with God, who God is and what God wants for us, for our country, and for this whole that God created. Prayer gets us on God’s side, so when we cast our ballot next month, we can do so, following the way of Jesus. We can vote for Jesus, no matter which candidates we select.

Amen.