

Soulful Citizenship: Criticism Without Cynicism
Matthew 22:1-15

I will admit to you that I am a politics junkie. I majored in Political Science in college; it was politics that steered me toward law school. I love the debate around issues in national elections; I love the years when we're occupied by political campaigns.

And with just that many words, I may have already made you nervous about this sermon. We have all learned, somewhere along the way, that when a preacher wanders too near the thin line that divides religion from politics, we are in dangerous territory. There's good advice for family gatherings: Stay away from discussions of religion and politics. The church version of that rule is even simpler: no politics...at all.

This is good advice, for the most part, especially if our biggest concern is avoiding conflict. Our feelings about political issues tend to run strong, and diverse. We can't assume that even people we love and trust and know well, or share faith with, will see things the same way we do—which always comes at a great surprise. I believe strongly that it's an abuse of this pulpit to speak from it about my political opinions, but some of the things I say may sound to you like politics when I am absolutely convinced I am speaking the word of God. It's murky, isn't it?

Religion and politics have always had an uneasy relationship in America. This nation was founded by people who were reacting to the history of England, where there was an official religion of the State, and a king who looked for the approval of the Pope. America's founders felt strongly that there should never be a particular religion declared official, or even preferred by the government. No religious doctrine should be adopted as law. That's what "separation of church and state" means. But that doesn't mean that faith was—then or now—unimportant to the nation's well-being, or to its decision-making—or that the values our faith compels us to don't influence our political views.

In the early 1800's, Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian was curious about how America formed itself into a nation, wrote about what made this country unique. He wrote, "I sought the greatness of the United States in her...harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!"

Of course there is a lot that can also be said about how the use of religion has distorted and maybe even misled this country's decision-making. Whatever your political views are, I bet you can call up memories of some politician who has bandied around a claim of righteousness or the words "God bless America" in a way that makes you roll your eyes. Or a public religious leader who speaks hatred rather than love. There's plenty of evidence on which you might conclude

that God has simply washed his hands of American politics, decided that government is not helpful to the work of justice and compassion, much less holiness.

But when we do that—when we decide, consciously or unconsciously, that our participation as citizens of this country is unrelated to our faith—both our citizenship and our humanity suffer. They dis-integrate: literally, they pull apart. What happens is what we see in political campaigns now: name-calling, condemnation of whole swaths of people we identify only by category: tea party-er, liberal, occupier. Wacko. Somehow, it becomes OK to make demeaning and dismissive statements about real people. If they have feelings, and maybe even good intentions, we don't feel the need to imagine them. We talk about other people in words we would never use in polite conversation.

Do you remember several years ago, in one of President Obama's first State of the Union addresses, a congressman shouted out "You lie!" in response to something the President said? It was unbelievably rude, a violation of almost everyone's idea of what civil discourse—particularly in Congress—is supposed to look like. Almost everyone condemned that bad behavior. "What a jerk," is what I thought; and that seemed like enough to say. Whoever that was—and I don't even know his name; it doesn't seem to matter—his views don't count; he is totally irrelevant.

But now that I think back on my own reaction, this is what I wonder: In my personal life, my everyday walking around trying-to-be-a-good-person life, I really try not to write people off by saying, "What a jerk." Why do I think it's OK to do that with someone just because they appear on my television screen? No matter how inappropriate his outburst was—and I am not excusing it, at all—is it possible that he made that mistake out of a conviction that is as deep as the principles I hold, and the things I'm so sure of that I am shocked and outraged when they are contradicted?

We hate the way elected officials in government refuse to move off of their polarized ideological positions. We are outraged by their inability to work together to get anything done. But I am quite sure they do their jobs this way because they are rewarded for it by the people who vote for them. They know that as voters, we respond to politicians who attack rather than listen, who are sure they are right, who don't change their minds.

Why do we want leaders who look like this, when this stubborn, self-righteous sureness is not what we value in ourselves, or in the people around us?

Sometimes we sing that prayer of St. Francis: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Is it possible that just like peace, a change in the way we practice democracy, the valuing of differences, listening for what we can learn and how we might find common ground, begins with us, this country's citizens— not by staying away from people who have a different point of view, but by staying *with* them—talking, listening, asking questions until we understand each other?

Many of us—me too—have let our whole participation in citizenship be reduced to an occasional vote. Other than that, politics is pretty much a spectator sport—entertaining, interesting, easy to

think of as the work of “those people,” who mostly disappoint us. But maybe citizenship requires more from us than sitting behind our television sets or computers and waiting for election day to arrive. Maybe citizens—that’s us—have to model the kind of behavior that we want our politicians and leaders to copy.

In Cuba, we were hosted by a Methodist Church whose culture, and sometimes theology, were quite different from the group of clergy from California/Nevada who went there. Over the week we were there, we heard many references to the American Church’s tragic slide into liberalism, and particularly to the danger of the Church having loosened its standards with respect to gay and lesbian people. We talked about this among ourselves. What were we supposed to do, as visitors, and as Christians who believe something different? Should we just listen politely and go home thinking how wrong, or backward, they are on these points? Did we have a duty to speak? I watched our Bishop, who has had a lot of practice leading a denomination that is deeply divided over these issues. One night, he engaged one of the Cuban leaders in one-on-one conversation. He clearly, respectfully, let him know that he should not assume that we share all the same beliefs. That some of us have come to different conclusions—particularly around LGBT issues—out of the same faith and search for God that motivates the Church in Cuba. It was masterful; a lesson to me in integrity, speaking your truth with love and respect.

I read an essay last week by a woman who visited her parents’ church and heard a lot of things that not only did she not agree with, but that sounded offensive to her. This is what she said:

“I could scoff at the church or sit in judgment. I could choose to stay home on Sunday mornings when visiting my parents. I could deny or hide my beliefs and perspectives to avoid conflict. Or I could choose to make...a “humble connection.” [with the people in that church] We can clearly define who we are and what we think, while being interested in the other’s position. Making a humble connection [she said] is challenging; it takes intention. There are tensions that won’t be resolved this side of heaven, but now and then, if we are willing to stand prayerfully in the tension, we glimpse grace.”¹

What she means by ‘grace’, I think, is the opportunity to see that goodness happens not only when we reduce differences down nothing and focus on the ways we are the same. Grace—which is another word for the way God loves—is loving one another *with*, and *in*, our differences.

When Jesus was walking around and teaching, he frustrated people on every side of the political divides of his day. Sometimes he sounded like a raging liberal, urging them to re-think everything; sometimes he sounded like a conservative, deeply embedded in tradition. Skeptics weren’t sure whether they should listen more or write him off. So they came to him, people from two groups, united only in their wanting to pin him down into a category they could hate. They asked him a question that was sure to identify him—as one of “those people” who accepted and complied with the godless Romans, or the “other side” who insisted that God’s authority called for resistance.

¹ Nicole Chilivis, *Humble Connections*, *The Christian Century*, December 23, 2015

First they flattered him, so he wouldn't see that he was about to alienate someone no matter how he answered. "You have such great integrity!" they said. "You teach the way of God; you never pander to popular opinion. So tell us honestly: Is it right to pay taxes to the Roman government, or should we resist?" This was a big political issue of the day, among the Israelites, who had been colonized by Rome.

But Jesus was smarter than them. "Do you have a coin?" he asked. "Let me see it." So they handed him a coin. "Whose picture is that on the coin?" Jesus asked. "Caesar," they said, of course. And then Jesus said all he was going to say to answer them. "Then give Caesar what is his, and give God what what belongs to him."

Some people have interpreted this story simply to support what we already think: that religion and government should be separate, that God does not mess with government, and politics should not invoke God. But whenever we think Jesus' meaning is obvious, we're missing something. Listen again.

How did Jesus recognize that the coin belonged to the Romans? Caesar's picture was on it. How would you know what belongs to God? What has God's picture on it? What bears the image of God?

Everything. Everything in creation. And especially—and this was understood by the people who stood in front of Jesus and I hope by us: every human being is created in the image of God, wears God's picture on our hearts. What belongs to God, Jesus was saying—to no one else but God—are all the beings that were born to look like God. Pay your taxes, vote, participate in vigorous debate; but don't ever forget that everywhere you go, *you belong to God*, that everywhere you go people are looking at you to see what God looks like.

We belong to God: the God who made us different from one another, who lives in every culture and nationality and political party, who welcomes us in our right beliefs and our wrong beliefs. The God who I'm pretty sure never says about anyone, "What a jerk."

In 1944, Supreme Court Justice Learned Hand said to a group of brand new citizens as he swore them in: "What, then, is [America's] spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded. The spirit of liberty is the spirit of him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten; that there may [still] be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest."

We should not, we cannot, be divided into separate parts: spiritual and political. We speak with one voice; we act out of one heart. We belong—each of us and every part of us—to God.