
What Are You Looking For?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 13, Year B

I'm here. Just back from vacation. Glad to be here. I've got to tell you though, I feel a little bit like I was at a basketball game. Things were going badly, one team was running away with it and I got up out of my seat and went to get a Coke. And then when I came back, the other team had made a run and now the game was competitive and people seem really exercised about it. It was very strange. I'm talking of course about the presidential election.

I mean, one candidate drops out and another one jumps in and now they're in a statistical tie. And I've got to say the state of play seems to be deteriorating just a little bit. I can see condescension and smugness getting ready to check into the game for one team and rage and anger and conspiratorial thinking coming off the bench for the other. I can almost anticipate what is about to happen. I feel like I've seen this game before. And also the polarization of our politics energizes many of us, it upsets a number of others. It's not that we disagree. That's what politics is all about, disagreeing and working through those disagreements. It's that those disagreements seem to be used to create division. That's where it seems to be problematic. We seem to grow more interested in putting down one side or the other than we are in being in it together.

Absolute statements and ideological purity then push aside curiosity and compassion and compromise. It seems at times that we've forgotten that we're all in this together and it's not really going to work if half of us hate the other half.

So I'm interested, what is it that we, people of faith, can do about the polarization of our politics? Now, I want to stop for a minute. I realize that some of you already have an answer, which is keep your faith out of it. But I believe that our faith is part of our politics and there's no avoiding it.

But I want to stick with this sentence just for a minute because when I say, "We," what I mean is not they. It's not what can they do? How did they create the problem? How can they solve the problem? It's we. What can we do? Maybe we can come up with a grand policy agenda. Maybe we can put together a coalition that makes material change, but maybe not. Maybe we can only do what can be done locally. We can only do what we can do with the people in front of us. We can only act with those that we already are in relationship with.

Also, when I say faith, I don't mean the church, I don't mean doctrine, I don't mean tradition, I don't even mean the Bible to the extent that they tell us what to think. All of those things inform our thought and they guide us in how to think. See the distinction between telling you what to think and telling you how to think? There are a lot of reasonable positions that you could take on almost any social or political issue, but to be true to our faith, our traditions, our doctrine and the Bible, we have to be the ones who walk into the room and see who's not there. We have to be the ones that listen for the voices that others can't hear. We have to be the one that speak for those who have lost their voice. All of that is part of our faith and all of that speaks into our politics. There's no way to be true to our faith and not have it animate our politics. It simply isn't true that faith is something private and politics is something public. Our faith animates, brings life to, and drives our politics.

Now, I want to leave this part of my sermon by quoting, kind of, Albert Einstein. Do you remember that famous quote he has on science and faith? I'm going to modify it slightly and say that faith without politics is lame and politics without faith is blind.

Our calling as faithful Christians is to put these two things together and somehow act in a world that is how Jesus calls us to be. What does that look like? I think our scriptures today, actually everything in the bulletin today helps with that. Let's look at Jesus and the Gospel of John. There in the sixth chapter of John, Jesus

deals with his disciples who come to him and say, "Give us a sign."

He just fed 5,000 people. You might've thought that was sign enough. But there's a reason they're asking for more and they're eager. What are you doing? Why are you here? Tell us what to do. Are you going to give us a sign? They're eager. Jesus says to them, "It's good to focus on all the external stuff, but you also need to focus on your inner life. I'm the bread of life. To eat this bread is to never be hungry again."

"I am the bread of life." To understand what Jesus means by that, I think you have to go back and remember that immediately after his feeding of the 5,000, people that heard about it, came for him to make him king. Jesus hears that they're coming and he leaves that spot, we're told, and goes to the mountain to avoid it. Now, why? The word king has great significance because you see the emperor of Rome is also a king. Not only that, the emperor has the authority to delegate other kings throughout the kingdom. So for Jesus to be called a king, the king of Israel, is to say that he's a rebel, to say that he's an insurrectionist, to say that he wants to fight the emperor for the same power and control and domination that the emperor has.

That's how the disciples remembered Moses who provided bread in the wilderness, who liberated Israel out of captivity and took them to the Promised Land. But that's not how Jesus wants to be king. To get a sense of how Jesus wants to be king or the kingdom, the reign of Christ, you might compare Jesus and the emperor. The emperor, of course, sits on top of a hierarchy, the purpose of which is to dominate everyone around and in it. The higher up you are, the more status you have. The power that you have you use in order to gain special privileges. That's how a hierarchy that's looking for dominance works. Jesus too is creating a hierarchy, but it's a different kind of hierarchy. It's not for the purpose of dominance, it's for the purpose of growth, it's for the purpose of communion.

We're in the Gospel of John, so think of Maundy Thursday. Jesus, the putative top of this hierarchy is the one who wraps a towel around his waist and like a slave washes the feet of his disciples. Jesus is the one who's eating at table with his friends, but also tax collectors and anyone else who seems to wander into his past. This is not a hierarchy for the purpose of dominating others. This is a hierarchy for the purpose of giving others life, of creating space in their lives for the Holy Spirit to move. That is the model that Jesus is giving us for our politics. Because he knows that to transform our world, we must start with our hearts. In order to do the right thing, we must have the right motivations. You've got to start with your heart. With us acting locally, it can be transforming, but it starts with our inner life.

And Paul, one of my favorite belligerents in all of the New Testament, seems in Ephesians to say the same thing, doesn't he? What is he calling the church to do? Be patient with each other, have humility, have kindness. These are the inner virtues that are necessary for the hierarchy that Jesus is calling for. These are the virtues that are necessary for relationship. And how does Paul describe it? He gives us this wonderful image, doesn't he, of the body of Christ? He does it here, he does it in The Corinthian Correspondence and he does it in Romans.

You know this image where each part of the body has an independent function and the body needs all of those parts. One can't really function without the other. The eye cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of you." The body only functions, the body is only healthy if all of the parts are there together.

Can you see the connection between this and noticing who's not in the picture, between this and hearing the voices of those who have lost their ability to speak? In order to create the body of Christ, we've got to ensure that all are participating in the body of Christ. We can disagree on how we do that, but that is what we are looking for as Christians.

So what then can we people of faith do about the polarization of our politics? My answer is create community. That's what we can do. Create community. Because what is polarization but the deterioration of relationship, the absence of community. Where people aren't gathering, where people don't know each other, where people can't hear, and see, and experience another person. This is how disagreements turn into tools for division rather than opportunities for compromise and transformation. It's about relationships.

What do we do as people of faith? We gather in church. We learn how to be together. We learn how to work through our disagreements in a productive way knowing that we are going to grow. We learned how to be kind. We learned how to be patient. We learned how to be humble. Because you can't have a real relationship without those virtues. We are literally creating space in the world for the spirit to move.

Remember our baptismal covenant? I will, with God's help we commit, strive to respect the dignity of every human being. This theme occurs over and over again. It's about community, it's about relationship. And no matter how small the start, we're on the right path. No matter how small the obstacle we have to engage in

order for that community to emerge, we're on the right path. There may be some big policy structure that makes everything okay. There may be a political platform that garners 98% of our population's support. There may be a coalition that you can draw together that is powerful enough to get everybody working together. But it doesn't have to be that grand. We can foster justice simply by being community. It sounds too simple to be true, but it is. We can foster justice just by being community.

So what is it we're looking for? I think Micah the prophet gives us a very succinct summary. "What does the Lord require of you?" Micah says. "To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God." These are community building virtues. These are community building attributes. Start with one relationship, let it multiply. When we create space for the spirit, the spirit can do amazing things. Remember, that's what Jesus said to his disciples as he departed. "I must leave you now because you are going to do amazing things." So why are we doing all this? Because Jesus told us to. Amen.