

## apples to apples at election time

My brothers and sisters *I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message, be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke and encourage, with the utmost patience.* In the name of the father...

Though I admit I am a few seasons late to the party, I got a bit hooked last month on the first season of *House of Cards*. For those who haven't heard about it, *House of Cards* was originally a British television show about a cut-throat legislator working his way into ever higher seats of power. For a while I couldn't put it down, watching episode after episode to see how the story unfolded. But as the season neared the end, I found myself utterly exhausted with the cynicism of it, with a story in which everyone uses one another to get something for themselves. *House of Cards* seemed to say that this is how human beings will behave in the swamp, in an environment in which leverage and power are all that matter.

After I finished the last episode of that first season, I felt no desire to start on the next one. I was exhausted. I was tired of the vulgarity, of the emotional violence of the show. That's a long way of saying that this dark, cynical, manipulative view of politics and power had worn out its welcome with me. By the end, I just felt gross.

Does anybody else feel gross about politics this week? I certainly do. I suspect that even if we have different perspectives and blame different people, the feelings of upset and dread are something many of us share right now. With a few weeks to go until the election, knowing that so much of the tension in our nation and our state is coming to a head in this moment and through the choices before us, I think it's important to acknowledge the (forgive me) elephant in the room and say that frankly, there is just a lot of pain, a lot of anger and uncertainty, and fear about what the world is going to look like on November 9<sup>th</sup>, the morning after the polls have closed.

Rather than wait until that moment, I think now is the right time for us as followers of Jesus to think a little bit about how Christians can engage our community in a time of election, can begin to heal brokenness, and most importantly proclaim the good news of Jesus in a way that the message can be heard and take root. Now, I promise that I'm not going to violate the rules about what we can and can't say in the pulpit. In fact, I'm going to tell you what those rules are and let you hold me accountable for it. But as one colleague said last

week, though *convention* tells us that as the church we need to keep our heads down and let the election do its thing for a few more weeks, in fact this is a time in which the soil is most ripe for some tilling, for proclaiming a more life-giving vision for the world.

Before we begin to really ask this question about the world on November 9<sup>th</sup>, let me take just a moment to make clear what the rules are about political speech in church. There is indeed a prohibition on political speech in the pulpit, and it applies equally to any non-profit with tax free status, including charities, hospitals and other not-for-profit organizations. It is not a question of free speech: the First Amendment gives the church the freedom to say just about anything it wishes, but certain kinds of speech will force us to forfeit our tax-free status. Now, the question of “should the churches be paying taxes” is another question entirely, but one for another day.

Here’s the heart of the rule<sup>1</sup>: a church cannot speak in favor of or in opposition to any candidate for office. That includes written statements, forums and classes, public appearances, and it most certainly includes the pulpit. I believe this is good because the separation of church and state is *really* good for the church. If it were more kosher for me to support candidates, the church would over time become more and more homogenous around people who agreed with me, which as you all know would make for a very thin, diminished church. And that is simply not how I understand the Body of Christ.

But in very simple terms, just about anything else out there is fair game. We can talk about any issues that are important to us, provided they are not a veiled support for one candidate over another. We can talk about equality, culture, or economics. We can and we should talk about poverty and class. As the candidates have proclaimed the gospel of the great middle class I find myself singing that *In Christ there is no middle class, in him no rich or poor*. Should I keep going with this? “But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth. We can also speak out about legislation or bond referenda such as the Greensboro Housing Bond, which I will vote for and I hope you will as well, because I believe it offers to the least of these the dignity of proper housing. I can do all this from the pulpit, and you can disagree with me, and we are still the body of Christ.

The great question is not, how do we keep the political out there and keep it to the personal and spiritual in here, but rather, how do we talk about what is really going on in our community, neither repressing our feelings nor indulging in the great dopamine rush of American politics? How do we care for our community and view this time and this election in light of our baptism in Christ?

Now, I have no interest in speaking of the relative merits of the candidates before us. This is simply not the setting to try to compare apples to apples, because to pretend to compare apples to apples would be to gloss over the painful reality that the apples we have before us are profoundly reflective of the orchard that has produced them. The lack of inspiring choice, the lack of meaningful discourse, we in so many ways have exactly what we as a culture have asked for. The orchard – and the orchard is where we live – is not well. The orchard is in need of care.

As Christians, we are called to participate in our communities through elections and in so many other ways, but perhaps our greatest vocation is to be able to look to the garden, the orchard, and with humility and patience, and begin to work God's healing. Because as followers of Jesus, we know something about time, we know something about seeding a harvest, and watering it with prayer, with compassion, and with self-emptying love of our neighbor.

And that is perhaps the key to understanding how a Christian can engage her community in a time of election, or even in a time of conflict. You don't have to overthink it. Love God; love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. That means that the love of our neighbor must be at the core of how we engage our community, including – and perhaps especially – when we vote.

I don't want to influence your vote. But I do want your vote to be deeply embedded in Christian love of your neighbor. The structures and systems of this world – the powers and principalities - are skilled at glossing over or even hiding our commitment of fidelity to our neighbor. But as Christians we see the world very differently; indeed, we have a responsibility to our neighbor that starts long before an election and continues long after the last vote is counted.

The writer of 2 Timothy could well have been a cultural critic today, or perhaps even a political pundit. *For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will run away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.* This is human nature when it becomes stuck in an adolescent mode, in which we learn and practice only those skills that will suit our own desires and soothe us in our familiar ways.

Discipleship offers us a more truthful way, especially when we can see plainly that the orchard is in such profound need of healing and that only love, compassion and grace will get us there. *Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself.* On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. These two

commandments are also at the very heart of how we proclaim the gospel to the world beyond the doors of the church.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/02/preaching-politics-from-the-pulpit-2012/>