

This has been a week with much to reflect upon. Our world continues to shift and our place in it changes. The historic visit of Pope Francis has been broadly well-received. One writer noted that if anyone doubted the Pope was political, this visit laid that to rest. The comment goes to a divergence of opinion among worshipers regarding whether “politics” has a place in the church or not. While politics is about power, it is also about forming alliances among people and groups. Politics is about advancing particular ideas and about how we order our daily lives.



The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth said that preachers must hold a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. If we believe the Gospel, we cannot be disconnected from the world. We do not have to accept the world’s values but we do live in this world and must contend with it.

Within the church and in the United States, we do have to be knowledgeable about the line between church and state to avoid problems with the IRS over church’s tax exemption. That line means a preacher (or a church) cannot tell you who to vote for (I imagine few of you would take to heart what I say on that front anyway!). We can, however, without jeopardizing our tax exempt status take positions on issues.

That is what Pope Francis did this week. In his speeches he reminded us that the Gospel calls us to care for the least among us. To make fishers of men so that each of us has the ability to care for ourselves and our world. To understand that God gives us stewardship of the earth and all living things in Genesis 1, just before God looks at creation and says that it is good, indeed very good.

The Pope might be following the advice from Mordechai in Esther, chapter 4, verse 14:

For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise up for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

The Pope is Pope for just such a time as this. A time when all the world needs to be reminded that we have gone astray from all the good that God created. Too often we have become intent upon our own promotion and well-being to the exclusion of those in need. We seem to have lost the ability to discuss our differences and instead insist upon a zero sum game: I win, you lose. To find a way forward without putting down another seems beyond some of us. Why are we unable to see that if we work together- each giving a little- we can both be better?

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

The Gospel reading continues the “in/out” and power struggle of the disciples. Last week it was an argument over who was the greatest. Who would hold the place of honor when Jesus was crowned king. Shuffling for position among the disciples.

This week it is upset because someone who was not one of the twelve was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Note the first sentence: ... we tried to stop him, because he was not following us (Mk. 9:38). **Us?** Wait a minute: aren’t we to follow Jesus and not the disciples? It is Jesus who gave the authority to the disciples to cast out demons and somehow it has become all about us, not about Jesus.

Jesus rebukes them with a reminder that one who does a deed of power in the name of Jesus will not soon be able to speak evil of Jesus (Mk. 9: 39). The disconnect comes if the one who just healed in Jesus’ name then immediately turns around and says Jesus has no power to heal. What you do matters more than what you say.

Then we get this extraordinary statement from Jesus: Whoever is not against us is for us (Mk. 9:40). Maybe Jesus was thinking of the Psalm we read: The Lord is on our side.

Those words: “The Lord is on our side” sometimes make me shiver. How often have you heard this or a similar phrase used to justify violence against another? We’re right and you’re wrong. Either/or. Win/lose. A narrowing of world view to my way or the highway. This is the kind of mindset that led to the Crusades and other horrors throughout history. I’m right and you’re wrong. God is on my side- you’re dammed. This phrase is used to promote one theology over another: the way I understand and worship God is the only way; your way is wrong. This mindset keeps the kingdom of God from becoming a reality on earth, to our eternal shame.

There’s an old joke about lawyers. If you have 4 lawyers in a room, how many opinions do you have? The answer: 5. Funny and yet sometimes I wish it were true more often. Each person has his or her own opinion and that is a good thing. We are each capable of reason and arriving at a decision about a particular topic. And, there is an opinion that represents the result of conversation, debate and ultimately consensus of a majority- maybe not unanimous, but an opinion most of those who are participating in the discussion can live with. Give and take. Consensus about an issue. We can all move forward having had the opportunity to state our views and yet understand and accept that we are part of a group that needs to be able to move forward as a group. We may not get everything our way, but as long as our fundamental values are heard and preserved, we ought to be able to reach consensus. It does not mean laying down and rolling over – not even trying to present our views on a topic. We can take Jesus as our example.

Jesus challenged the powers of his day. Yes, there were times when he used strong language such as “you hypocrites” (Mt. 15: 1-20). In that instance the dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes related to subverting the relationship between children and parents (honor your Mother and your Father) to increase the money flowing into the coffers of the Temple.

Jesus used violence when he overturned the money-lenders tables in the forecourts of the Temple (Mk 11:15-19). Jesus’ anger was kindled against those who were taking advantage of persons

coming to the Temple to pray. The place of God's presence had been turned into a marketplace where some prospered at the expense of others. These are the kinds of situations where we are called to take a stand. Where we see wrong and injustice, we are to speak. In the words of Mordechai, perhaps we have been placed in the situations we are in to take that stand.

“Whoever is not against us is for us” (Mk. 9:40). The enemy of my enemy is my friend is another way this sentence has been said. I suspect this is not the meaning Jesus had in mind, for he goes on to say that “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward” (Mk. 9:41).

I suspect that Jesus was reminding his followers that labels are largely irrelevant. Actions matter. It doesn't matter to God, I suspect, if you and I have found a home as Episcopalians and someone else as a Methodist, Presbyterian or Baptist. It is belief in, and responding to, God that matters. It is responding to God as giver of life and source of all that is good. It is in respecting the viewpoints of others even when they disagree with our own – and not resorting to violence simply because we disagree about any number of issues. It is in honoring one another that we honor God. Jesus was reminding his followers that we are blessed to be a blessing.

Jesus reminds us that “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mk. 9:50). In Leviticus, there is reference to a covenant between God and God's people as a covenant of salt (Lv. 2:13).¹ Salt in the Mesopotamian stood for purity and wisdom. Also, salt is used both to add flavor and to preserve foods. Its ability as a preservation agent signifies the duration of the covenant or agreement made between the parties.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us that we are the “salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13). We are the ones, believing in Jesus as the Son of God, to bring “a good flavor to the lives of those we encounter. There should be something in our conduct that shows the fruit of the life to which God has called us.”² One of the ways in which we show that fruit is to “be at peace with one another.” How, when we most deeply disagree with someone else, might we find ways to be at peace with the other person?

In this instance, remembering that “the Lord is on my side” might be turned into a positive mantra to repeat when we are tempted to lose our temper or to take violent action. Remembering that we are called to be the salt of the earth and to be at peace with one another can only happen if we lean upon God and remember that through God we are blessed to be a blessing – and the Lord is on our side when this is the path we take towards God and our neighbor. *Amen.*

¹ <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/1795/Salt-as-Metaphor.htm> (September 29, 2012).

² *Id.*