

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
October 23, 2016

"US AGAINST THEM OR ALL FOR EACH OTHER?"

by Mary Anne Biggs

2 Timothy 4:6-18 ~ Luke 18:9-14

Do you remember the first time you were old enough to vote for a president? For me it was the election of 1972. I spent a long day in class, but I looked forward all day to voting for Richard Nixon, who had promised to bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam. When I got to the poll at about 6:45, the line was very long, but I waited patiently and felt proud that I was going to do my duty as a citizen. I got to the front of the line and showed the election judge my registration card. "Oh!" she said. "You're in the wrong place! You're supposed to vote at the elementary school on the other side of the campus." I ran to my car and rushed over to the elementary school, but I was too late. The polls had closed!

I learned the hard way that good citizenship begins with finding the right place to vote. I also learned to go to the polls first thing in the morning rather than last thing of the day. I didn't tell anyone about this stupid mistake. It was too embarrassing. Still, it wasn't a total disaster. When the Watergate mess began to implode and my friends were complaining loudly about the president's behavior, I told them with all honesty, "Well, it isn't *my* fault. *I* didn't vote for the man!"

It was my first opportunity to vote, but by no means my first involvement in politics. You see, I grew up in the church! The church has always had its internal politics as well as its political intrigues and entanglements with the state.

Look at the politics in the New Testament ... different parties and factions ... divisions over style and ethics as well as theology. Paul is always writing to complain about his enemies ... what they are doing to the church ... how they are attacking him personally and attacking his authority. And that didn't change as the church continued. We might read 2nd Timothy as a kind of memorial to the Apostle Paul ... written in his name and in his honor ... to the church a generation or two after him. And how was Paul remembered?

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Tim 4:6-8)

We could all wish for such an epitaph. Perfection is beyond us. We can't always be right ... but we can be persistent ... we can be faithful across the long haul.

Still, Paul was remembered for more than his faithfulness. Paul was an organizer, the founder and promoter of a far flung ministry of churches across Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. He stayed in touch with them not only by his well-known correspondence, but through his lieutenants, whom he sent *in lieu* of going himself to churches who were in conflict with one another or under attack from beyond. Keeping such an organization going was no easy task in the days before mass communication ... and across such diverse political and ethnic lines. Resistance to the gospel was great. People wanted to shape the church to suit their personal tastes or to put themselves in a position of power. Paul had his friends in the struggle, but also

his enemies. Demas deserted him ... Alexander opposed him ... Crescens and Titus weren't there when he needed them.

What we see here ... confirmed by all of Paul's letters ... is a man remembered for his grass roots political engagement ... who got involved in the give and take of human conflict for the sake of the gospel. He did not try to be neutral ... pretend to be too good ... too "spiritual" for the fray. The consequences of staying silent were too great. Too many people ... generations to come ... would be affected by the decisions that were made. And sometimes, Paul's involvement in the gospel led him to political engagement in the secular world ... in the Jewish politics of the ruling Sanhedrin ... in the pagan politics of the silver trade supporting idolatry in Ephesus ... in the political subtleties of being a Roman citizen in the lands beyond Rome. Paul was a canny strategist for the sake of the gospel. He was involved heart and soul ... and because of this he shaped what the church would become.

Nothing is quite so inescapable or disillusioning as politics. Inescapable, because, as Aristotle observed, humanity "is by nature, a political animal." Politics is about power in relationships and groups. Every human relationship and group is therefore political by definition. You can be honest and intentional ... or dishonest and in denial ... but if you are alive you are involved in politics. Politics are not only a function of government ... but of families, clubs, universities, sports teams, yes, even churches. And politics are always disillusioning because we do not always get our way ... and sometimes the conflict itself does more damage than the goal is worth.

Cynicism about politics is as old as politics itself. Many of us feel what Euripides wrote in 425 B.C.: *Spare me the sight of this thankless breed, these politicians who cringe for favors from a screaming mob and do not care what harm they do their friends providing they can please a crowd!*

He might as well have been describing the political ads barraging us across the airwaves this month. H.L. Mencken said, *"If experience teaches us anything at all, it teaches us this: that a good politician, under democracy, is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar."* And in his devil's dictionary Ambrose Bierce defined politics as *"a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles."*

From that first lost opportunity to vote in 1972 ... just to name a few ... I have lived through Watergate, the Teheran Hostage Crisis, Iran-Contra, Desert Storm, 9/11, Afghanistan and ISIS and the on-going tragedy in Styria. I voted for some presidents, and not for others, but sometimes you wonder, what's the use? We haven't had a president in my lifetime who didn't fail us in some way... let alone the lesser lights and dim bulbs on the political scene. And apparently I'm not alone in feeling this way. Americans continue to stay home from the polls in increasing numbers ... not even bothering to vote ... let alone remain informed about the political issues or the candidate's positions on them. Increasingly we hear about para-military groups who have decided that our own government is the enemy. But democracy has no greater enemy than the apathetic disengagement of its citizens and their voluntary surrender of power to a smaller and smaller electorate.

In a democracy, there is no excuse for not getting involved in politics. It is not only un-American ... it is un-Christian to sit on the sidelines when matters of consequence which affect the lives of countless other people are being decided. As Dante Alighieri said, *"The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crises, maintain their neutrality."* Separation of church and state does not mean the separation of Christians from

political involvement. It means the church shall always be free from the state in order to confront it ... as the biblical prophets confronted the kings with God's demand for justice and righteousness in the land.

I often seem to find myself engaged in a political battle to oppose the agenda of the religious right. But I do not fault their freedom to be involved in politics out of their deepest values. I fault their theology, because bad theology makes for bad politics. I fault their demagoguery, because they like to imply that all real Christians agree with them. I take issue with the definite article in "The Christian Coalition," as if there were no other. I object to their turning our churches into partisan political base camps where the right to own assault weapons and the teaching of phonics are elevated to sacred status ... with biblical values of justice and compassion.

The ends do not justify the means, and Christians are bound to a higher ethic of honesty, integrity, and a public discourse which avoids the character assassination and dirty tricks of common politics. On a website entitled, GodVoter.org, an endorsement was made for Donald Trump even though they denounced him ... and I quote ... as a "thrice-married, pseudo-Christian showman who is at best a neophyte to conservatism." They went on to say, "Four years ago, the choice Christians faced was even worse: vote for Mitt Romney, the high priest of a Satanic cult that claims Jesus is the brother of Satan, or vote for Barack Obama, the champion of homosexuality, abortion and Islam."

Our public discourse has become meaner and muddier since the Christian Coalition became active in 1989. It seems to me that involvement in politics should elevate rather than demean the public spirit. Most of all, I object to their abandonment of our central Christian value of soul freedom ... that genuine decisions to follow Christ can only take place in an atmosphere of spiritual freedom ... where the state does not establish and enforce one religion's principles over another.

But I will say this ... the religious right is ahead of the rest of us in realizing that you do not change the world sitting on the sidelines and complaining about politicians. You either light a candle or curse the darkness. You either get involved in the process, or you lose all right to complain. The biblical model for politics is Paul's model of engagement for the sake of the gospel. The Christian gets involved out of love and stays loving in the manner of his or her involvement.

Paul was remembered as a political fighter, but he was also remembered for his ability to transcend the conflict, to recognize that the sovereignty of God was higher than his own view of the truth ... and that a common core of humanity and grace united him even with his political enemies.

At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. (2 Tim 4:16-18)

Paul had the capacity to forgive, and his faith was not in his political friends ... his hope was not in political victory ... his love was not for the conflict ... but all were set in the God who ultimately reigns above the vicissitudes of human politics.

In Christian politics the goal is never us against them, but all for each other. And in a democracy, the political struggle is never over. As humans we are always in process ... always on a journey towards making the world what God would want it to be ... a place where all people can live together in peace and share in the blessings of God's good creation. And perhaps

we will never agree with each other on how to get there. But as Reinhold Niebuhr observed, *"Nothing is quite so difficult, yet so genuinely Christian, as to remember that in all political struggles there are no saints but only sinners fighting each other."* The life of Paul and 2nd Timothy's testimonial to him give us a model for both engagement and transcendence of human politics. If we do not engage and only transcend ... we become irrelevant and useless. We change nothing ... help no one. But if we only engage and do not transcend ... we become arrogant and destructive ... giving ourselves permission to do damage in the name of God. *It is* possible to be involved in politics without demonizing your opponents. *It is* reasonable to realize that every battle isn't Armageddon ... and that picking the right battles is as important as winning them. Let us also remember our faith in God ... that while we act to bring about God's dominion ... God guarantees it *will* come in time. We cannot lose where we are right. We will not succeed where we are wrong. But perhaps by grace, God will use us to create a world where all people can thrive together in peace.

Therefore, I encourage you to be a Christian citizen ... to vote your Christian conscience in this current election ... to engage in the political process in loving Christian ways ... and to be guided first of all by God's demands for justice and compassion in the way we order our society. And may God guide us *at least* to make this nation ... and this world ... a better place for all God's children as we fight the good fight.

May we pray?

Sovereign, Ruling God, We thank you for making us free to choose our faith. And for the freedom we have in our nation to choose our leaders and govern ourselves. Forgive us where we waste our opportunities and shirk our responsibilities. But guide us to the leaders and the laws which would make our society just and compassionate. And in all our political conflicts, let our goals and our methods please you in the love of Christ, whose disciples we would be. Amen.