

The Greatest Among You Will Be Your Servant

Joshua 3:3-17, Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37, Thessalonians 2:9-13, Matthew 23:1-12

October 30, 2011, Year A, Proper 2

St. Philip's, Brevard, NC

Here we are October 30, 2011. Do you know what that means? It means we have a whole year of presidential campaigning and polarized, partisan politics that already prove uglier than usual, and then throw in the Tea Party and the Occupy Wall Streeters, and we're in for a zealous or depressing year – depending on your perspective.

Does the Bible, did Jesus address politics? I frequently have folks say to me the Church should not be involved in politics. I guess it depends on what one means by politics. I remember a preacher of a mega-church in Florida with a large television audience speaking to the local Rotary Club and being horrified when he said, "I personally control over 50,000 votes, and any politician in Florida who doesn't do what I ask won't be reelected." No, this is not the Church's politics. Although the Church far too often mimics the bickering we see in the Capitol chambers or the name calling of news conferences and presidential debates, it is also not to be involved in this type of politics. But yes, the Bible is a political document, and Jesus advocated politics.

Why begin a sermon with such references to politics? Because today's text from Matthew is more than a diatribe against hypocrisy. Instead, Jesus condemns the hypocrisy of the leaders and confronts politicians who misuse religion, abuse the people and turn the whole spiritual enterprise into a self-serving charade. In first century Palestine, no separation of church and state existed. The leaders of the synagogues were the town leaders, the Temple leaders were (while only at the whim of the Roman Empire) the leaders of Israel. They would have been both our bishop and governor in one. And so if we don't see Jesus as political in today's matthean scene, we aren't listening.

It began when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey – a symbol of a humble king yes, but a political leader nevertheless – and challenged the system of money changing, the means of the Temple tax which financially supported the Temple leaders and those who kept them in power. By various parables, he warned these leaders and rebuked their efforts to trap him. Still standing within the Temple compound (imagine him on October 30, 2011, standing in the Capitol Rotunda) he minces no words in his condemnation. He condemns their claim to virtue, a claim which they used to oppress ordinary folk. Because they had positions of authority, they assumed that they had the right to run other people's lives. It was against this tyranny that Jesus contended.

Some things never change. We live in an incredibly different world than did Jesus. Nevertheless – how amazing is the consistency in behavior of those who abuse their power. Members of Congress – from both sides of the aisle – elected to serve the common good are willing to sacrifice our nation to bring down the other party and serve those who underwrite their campaigns rather than those who elect them. For the last 10 years or so candidates from every political persuasion have begun and ended each public statement with, "God bless America!" as if that somehow brings absolution to the hypocrisy taking place.

Jesus told his followers: *The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what*

they teach. How many school or university leaders or public service administrators care little about their students or those they serve? Prior to becoming a priest I worked for 23 years in public mental health services – 14 as CEO. It was only a minor symbol, but when I arrived as the CEO of the mental health center in Abilene, TX, I noticed the parking lot looked like the organizational chart – with the parking places of those at the top of the chart closest to the front door. The direct care, administrative and maintenance staff were grouped the furthest, that is except for the patients for whom there were no reserved places. The first thing I did when I arrived was have the maintenance department paint over my name and have the spaced read “reserved for patients,” park my car at the furthest parking space, and go to my first meeting with the leadership staff. I then asked them to go into the parking lot and see if they saw anything that reflected who was the most important person who would enter our building that day. I tell this story because, when I arrived at seminary in Austin, TX, which had twice as many commuting students as it had parking spaces resulting in students frequently getting parking tickets, I was amazed (or horrified) at this institution for training future servants of the Church that the dean who lived across the street from the seminary and never used his parking place and the Bishop of the Diocese of Texas, the symbol of Christ’s humble service, who was on campus one day a year both had reserved parking spaces in the center of the campus. Perhaps rather than asking about their theology, we should ask those we elect to sit on the Bishop’s Chair if they expect reserved parking spaces.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. While almost no members of Congress have served nor have a child who serves in combat, until recently our Congress, with great bravado, again on both sides of the aisle, approved sending yours, my and others’ sons and daughters and grandchildren into harm’s way.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. “Phylacteries” is another term for *tephillin*, small leather boxes containing portions of the Torah strapped to the forehead and arm during the recitation of prayers, in literal obedience to Deuteronomy 6:8. The “fringes” are the tassels attached to the prayer shawl. While meant as aides to ones prayers, both phylacteries and fringes can be worn to draw attention to the wearer’s scrupulous religious observance. Do we think Jesus would not confront today’s leaders, those who claim the sanctity of life but place greed over the need of those starving and dying from lack of medical care?

Yes, my friends, the Bible is one of the most political documents you will ever find. However, right now, as far as I know, none of us serves in Congress or as a bishop. So, what’s the implication for us?

Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do. Our problem is not our laws, but that we have far too many elected officials – from both parties – motivated more by power and greed than by serving the common good, who see themselves as above the law and who have used mass media and sound bites to divide our nation over partisan politics. Rather than follow their example, we need to discuss differences with respect, without implying that if the other doesn’t agree he or she is un-American or a heartless capitalist. We are to be committed to the Gospel and Divine Justice regardless of our party affiliation and which party is in power: holding elected officials accountable for promoting the common good, not for winning

partisan skirmishes. In our Prayers of the People, we pray for our elected officials. We need to do so regularly in our corporate and personal prayers. During elections, we need to pray: not pray that our preferred candidate be elected but pray for guidance on how to vote. We need to have more conversations within our parishes and with fellow Christians about what an earthly kingdom of God would look like and request our officials to support legislation that would best bring such visions to fruition. We need to elect bishops more focused on humble service than on the power of sitting on the Bishop's Chair or having reserved parking spaces.

As a priest, I have been asked in various ways, what's the minimum one must do to be licensed as a Lay Eucharistic Minister, inducted into the Daughters of the King, elected to the Vestry. To which I respond, "To ask what one must do to pass is to miss the point." Compassion and love dictate the way Scripture should apply and how we fulfill our lives as Christians, not some kind of legalistic bureaucracy which assumes God is a control freak. Being a Lay Eucharistic Minister is about more than bearing the chalice; being a Daughter of the King is about more than wearing an Order of the Daughter of the King Cross; and being a member of the Vestry is more than having a vote on the parish budget or personnel decisions. They are about modeling the Christian life by being faithful in our worship attendance, seeking prayerful discernment for all of our decisions and actions and offering our time and skills to support the mission of bringing about God's kingdom. We need to understand that these are the vows each of us took or someone took for us at our baptisms and which we restate each time we celebrate a baptism.

We live in an incredibly different world than did Jesus, but in God's kingdom, the greatest among you will still be your servant.