

The Christian Citizen

Luke 4:16-21; Philippians 2:5

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The sermon this morning is the second in a two part series on “Religion and Politics.” Scott Black Johnston preached last Sunday on “Religion and Political Leaders.” The topic I have been given is “Religion and Citizenship,” focusing more on ordinary folk like you and me.

Unfortunately, Jesus never mentioned the word “citizenship” or “citizens,” so far as we know; though Jesus did have plenty to say about what it means to be members of the human family; about how to treat neighbors; about justice, mercy, kindness, humility, truth, and trust, and all those other virtues that impinge on what we usually think about when we use that phrase, “Christian Citizen.” Incidentally, here’s a tip that I have personally found helpful across the years: it is, “Beware anytime you hear the word “Christian” used as an adjective—like “Christian Yellow Pages,” or “Christian Right,” perhaps even “Christian Citizenship.” Janie and I lived up East for a number of years, and we learned quickly that there were many summer camps for children that were promoted as a Christian camp, which, we then discovered, was a code for “no Jews allowed.” So it’s not always true, but it’s worth being wary. I know the worst haircut I ever got in my life was by a barber who promoted himself as a “Christian Barber.”

Nonetheless, we have two texts today that I trust will guide us in discerning how one might go about honoring our duty to God and country at the same time. The first is the familiar account in Luke of Jesus’ inaugural sermon, preached, as you remember, in his hometown church. But Jesus used that occasion to declare what he perceived his calling of God to be. Listen:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ‘the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And then he began to say to them, today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Then, the second text is a single sentence from the Apostle Paul, who admonishes all those who would seek to follow Jesus’ example. Paul’s words are these: “Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus.” And then, as a non-scriptural sub-text from one of America’s most famous wordsmiths, Noah Webster, these words:

**“Whatever makes (human beings) good Christians makes them good citizens.”
Thanks be to God.**

The dilemma for us twenty-first-century Americans who take our faith and citizenship seriously is essentially none other than the dilemma Jesus himself faced, trying to balance his own loyalties as a citizen of the state and as a citizen of the Kingdom of God at the same time: religion and politics. Well, now, the first thing that needs to be said, up front and very boldly, is that religion and politics *do* mix. Surely we all know that. Anybody who tries to tell you that religion and politics do not mix, what they usually mean is that “your religion doesn’t mix with my politics.” It has not always been quite so obvious, however, that religion and politics do mix, for prior to the Reformation, it was widely assumed that the world operated in two distinct and unique orders: one, the realm of the world, the other, the realm of the spirit; and the two rarely intersected unless it was to co-opt God for political purposes (which, as Scott Black Johnston reminded us last Sunday is still practiced in some quarters). But prior to the Reformation, generally speaking, while rulers and conquerors gave lip service to God, religion was perceived and often preached as having to do rather exclusively with eternal salvation; that is, Heaven and how to get there. Which is what makes John Calvin and his Reformation colleagues so crucial, because it was Calvin, more than anyone else, who acknowledged that we belong to God and therefore in all our lives [by which he meant not only the longevity of our lives, but the quality and the character of our lives], in all of that, our calling is to glorify God in every aspect of our being—leading Calvin to contend that God’s purpose for us human beings is not primarily to earn ourselves a mansion in Heaven, but rather, God’s primary purpose for our lives is to reform the world according to the word of God. Which meant for Calvin, the infusion of our faith values into every aspect of our existence—social, economic, and, for our purposes this morning, political. It is why Noah Webster could conclude years later: “Whatever makes us good Christians makes us good citizens.”

It usually comes as a surprise to learn that Calvin considered that the highest calling for a Christian is that of “Magistrate”—not ministry, or teaching, or healing—public service. Listen to these words from the final chapter of Calvin’s *Institutes*: “Wherefore no doubt might now be entertained by any person that Civil Magistracy is a calling not only holy and legitimate, but by far *the most* sacred and honorable in human life.” Now, there is a statement every politician, and every aspiring politician, and, indeed, every citizen, ought to take down. Even we Presbyterians often forget that in our tradition the call to public service is regarded as a sacred calling. It was a tradition Calvin not only preached but practiced.

In Calvin’s Geneva, the city council and the Church Session were the same people. It’s hard for us to imagine that, and certainly nobody would propose that kind of theocracy for today; yet, the principle is informative. Listen to the words from McNeil’s classic history of Calvin: “After the 1557 election, the town councilmen, under Calvin’s leadership, ordered a reforming visitation of the city (that is, the elders went into the homes of the city), where servants were admonished to attend church and parents to send their children to school. No fires were to be permitted without chimneys; chimneys were to be swept for safety; latrines were to be provided for houses where they were lacking; rooms were not to be let without a license.” “Such

matters [all] came within Calvin's own care," records the historian, who goes on to note that it was under Calvin's leadership that laws were passed requiring railings on balconies for the protection of children; laws regulating weights and measures in the butcher shop; laws outlawing the recruitment of mercenaries to fight in other people's wars; legislation to provide for the well-being of the poor, particularly the widows and orphans, and much more. You and I are the theological descendants of a religious tradition that understood the mandate for the common good as a Christian calling. Moreover, the preservation of common good is first and foremost the responsibility not of the church, but of the political structures, because, as Reinhold Niebuhr taught us much later, "That is where the power to get things done resides." It was Niebuhr who, more than any other in our time, redeemed the word "power" from the category of "unseemly" to its legitimate place in the Christian lexicon. Niebuhr, who coined the phrase "Christian Realism," observed that power is the way things are accomplished in God's world and it's unrealistic to think otherwise. Power *will* be used, either for good or for ill, thus it becomes incumbent on us Christians, Niebuhr contented, to see to it that political power is used to serve God's purposes; or, as one puts it: "everything is politics; however, politics is not everything." Being a good citizen comes from knowing the difference.

The second truth that emerges as we try to integrate faith and citizenship is that while God is always personal, God is never private. "Jesus loves me, this I know" but Jesus does not love me any more than Jesus loves you; and Jesus does not love you and me together, any more than he loves all those others. The greatest theological trap one can fall into is to so privatize God's grace that we act as if we are somehow more favored than some others. That horrible cliché, "There but for the grace of God go I," usually whispered upon encountering some derelict, drunk and passed out on the street corner, is a discredit to the gospel; implying that God is more gracious toward me than that other poor soul. God is always personal, but never private. And, may I add, particularly in a culture like our own—the temptation to privatize the faith as in "I come to the garden alone, and he walks with *me* and he talks with *me* and he tells *me* I am his own"—a hymn which, incidentally, should never be sung unless it's followed immediately by "Christ for the World We Sing"—the temptation to privatize the faith always falls heaviest on people like us (the privileged) for whom it is so tempting to count privilege as entitlement; well deserved, honestly earned, our due for our hard work and righteousness.

Now, I am persuaded that the biggest gap in the theological understanding of our culture at large (I count myself in that group) is the disconnect between private morality and public morality. Most of us, when we think of morality, tend to think in archaic, individualistic categories: "We don't drink, and we don't chew, and we don't go with girls that do"—private morality. Now, personal morality is important, make no mistake; but when one reads the Scriptures—the prophets, the New Testament evangelists, the sermons of Jesus himself—it is social morality that counts. And let us never forget Jesus' inaugural sermon, when people were beginning to wonder, "Who is this Jesus anyway?" questioning his purpose, and his motives, and testing his credibility; in his first sermon in his home town church, Jesus took the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has appointed me to preach the good news to the poor; to proclaim freedom to the captives, sight to the

blind, liberty to all who are oppressed.” Not a word about personal piety, or prayer, or the promise of Heaven; and to the chagrin of every fire-and-brimstone fundamentalist then or since, no altar call summoning the lost to “confess their sins, sign up and be saved.” It is not just our prayer, you see; it is our calling: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.” But now, of course, you know the rest of the story. The sermon was not what Jesus’ hometown congregation wanted or expected, and so the righteous folk of his own home town church promptly ushered Jesus out of the city. They wanted a sermon on private morality, Jesus preached a sermon on public morality, and Luke records “They were filled with wrath.” Now, one might think, reading the Scriptures that public morality and private morality would go hand in hand. But the truth is, social morality has never automatically followed from private virtue. Else, why did it take years of public protest and, finally, the passage of the civil rights bill to force the lunch counters and churches of our beloved Bible Belt South to open their doors to all people? Individual righteousness never guarantees social righteousness. This is where our faith impinges on our citizenship; and why we must never give up on the role of government to insure justice and mercy, to insure human rights, to guarantee the peace and provide for the common good for all our citizens—remembering as Biblical theologian Karl Barth reminded us, that “God always has a bias” (we don’t ordinarily think of God as being biased) but, reading the Bible, it is hard to refute. “God’s bias,” says Barth, “is always on the side of the poor and the powerless”; words which were later reflected, not by a preacher, but by a politician, Franklin Roosevelt, during the worst financial crisis this nation has ever faced, when he said, “The test of our progress as a nation is not whether we add to the abundance of those who have much, but whether we provide enough for those who have little.” God is always personal, but never private.

So then, what’s a citizen to do? Should one, for example, assume the theological stance that our primary calling of God is to fashion life in the world according to the word of God, and in doing so to seek as a model the mind of Christ? How, in any practical manner of speaking, does one do that in today’s complex political and social environment? Well, the first thing, of course, is that we earnestly seek to know the mind of Christ, because there is an awful lot of subjectivity when it comes to discerning the mind of Christ. But with a little serious study, it’s not all that difficult to get a pretty realistic sense of those deep moral values and core commitments which directed Jesus’ thoughts and actions. We may not know as much as we would like about the mind of Jesus, but we know enough. And there’s plenty to go on—Sermon on the Mount, Beatitudes, Parables, the Old Testament prophets.

Well, as we consider this matter of our own Christian citizenship, there comes to mind an incident at the White House which I think gives us some guidance. A delegation of religious leaders met with President Kennedy to express their concern about the actions he was initiating in Southeast Asia. Quickly in the conversation they realized that his mind was already made up, but they also realized that he had already thoroughly considered their position, though he rejected it. And so one of the clergymen said, “Mr. President, I can see you have made your decision, aware of the objection we have brought. Now, what can we do to help you be understood by the American people?” Of course the president coveted support, but he responded, “Perhaps you should do nothing. The function of religion is not to sanction the actions of the

president, but to submit them to critical review.” And at that moment the president revealed a profounder understanding of Christian citizenship than the clergyman who posed the question. The long historic role of religion in the public arena is that of critic—loving critic, to be sure— but always the critic; submitting every law, every regulation, legislative act, administrative policy, and judicial pronouncement to the scrutiny of those sweeping moral imperatives and prohibitions of our faith; applauding what is consistent, protesting what is contradictory, and always willing to engage in civil and serious moral discourses in areas of disagreement.

Lest all this remain in the stratosphere of theological rhetoric, let me leave you with a timely case in point. Bill Coffin, as many of you know, is the former pastor of New York’s famed Riverside Church. He has been an outspoken advocate for peace during his entire ministry. Now old and terminally ill, Coffin offered recently an alternative approach to the political decision to invade Iraq. Following 9/11 Coffin said,

Our response might have been, we will respond, but not in kind. We will not seek to avenge the death of innocent Americans by the death of innocent victims elsewhere, lest we become what we abhor. We refuse to ratchet up the cycle of violence that brings only ever more death, destruction, and deprivation. What we should do is build coalitions with other nations. We should share intelligence, freeze assets, and engage in forceful extraditions of terrorists if internationally sanctioned. We should do all in our power to see justice done, but by the force of law alone, *not* by the law of force.

This could have been,” he says, “a teachable moment to help Americans deepen the quality of their suffering by identifying with others around the world who suffer, and to help them abandon the American illusion of invincibility.”

Now, you may search the mind of Christ and come to a different conclusion. Nor do I offer Coffin’s response as *the* Christian answer. I do offer it, however, as a model of a process of serious biblical reflection that is consistent with our historic Presbyterian tradition. And whenever we do that, then Webster is right: “What makes good Christians makes good citizens.”