

Right Action

I don't often talk about politics from the pulpit – and don't worry, today will not be an exception. I don't often talk about politics because even though I have my own opinions, I also have to be the pastor of *all* of you, and you are all over the place when it comes to politics, both in the church and our country. I am also very aware that we are all sinners in the eyes of God, and that the only one who can make a claim to absolute truth is Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel Jesus tells us that if we continue in his word, we are truly his disciples, and we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. I am keenly aware that those verbs are in the future tense. On this earth, truth is not relative, but it is partial.

I don't often talk about politics from the pulpit, but I am struck by two events that took place in the political sphere recently. One was the funeral of John McCain at the Washington Cathedral, and the other was the Senate confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh as a nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court. One provided testimony to the enduring integrity of a man lauded by people all over the political spectrum. The other was an often chaotic spectacle revealing how intensely divided we are as a nation. One lifted people up. The other set their teeth grinding against one another. Christ was clearly present in one – McCain's funeral was a majestic Episcopal service in the beautiful Washington Cathedral. In the confirmation hearings, there was a lot more interest in earthly power than seeking after God.

In the midst of these two extremes I read the letter of James that we heard this morning. James is all about what we say and what we do, so it fit right into the week's news. James gets a bad rap sometimes because he appears to say that works are more important than faith – that was Martin Luther's complaint. However, what James means by faith is assenting to certain beliefs, giving lip service, as it were, without any indication that those beliefs might change one's behavior. Jesus said essentially the same thing when he said that you will know people by their fruits. Bad trees produce bad fruit and good trees, good fruit.

At the heart of this problem is the question of which is more important: right beliefs or right actions? In church jargon, it's the conflict between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Some people focus on assenting to the right beliefs, irrespective of what one does. Others say that right actions reveal what's in the heart of a person, whatever they believe. In the Church this conflict has surfaced again and again. Most recently it has shown up in the Episcopal Church and other denominations over the question of same-sex marriage. For some that offends their beliefs; for others it is the right thing to do, so let's move on.

This past week I read an article about Bishop William Love of New York's Diocese of Albany. Bishop Love is one of eight Episcopal bishops who will not allow their priests to perform same-sex marriages. At the recent General Convention of the Episcopal Church a compromise resolution was passed that would allow same-sex couples to be married in their own church by a priest from another parish, so that the local priest would not have to violate conscience. During the debate in the House of Bishops, Bishop Love and some of the other bishops expressed their gratitude that they had been heard and taken seriously in the crafting of the resolution. Most of the eight bishops eventually accepted it. Bishop Love did not.

In the article which appeared in an Albany newspaper, Bishop Love focused his objection on the definition of marriage as he sees it expressed in the Bible. At the same time, he insisted that all humans are made in God's image and that we are all sinners before God; he was not about to condemn anyone. He supports civil unions and legal protections for same-sex partners. Those who disagree with him spoke of him as serious and prayerful, always clear and consistent in his position.

Bishop Love makes an effort to link his beliefs and his action. Where we as Episcopalians differ, of course, is whether or not we agree that his are the *right* beliefs and the *right* actions. Some say yes; others say no. James uses other examples in his letter, ones that raise less anxiety for us, with which we are more likely to agree. If we believe that all humans are made in the image of God, James would suggest, how can we give preference to the rich at the expense of the poor? If we believe that we are all sinners redeemed by Christ, how can we show partiality? "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but you do not have works... Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." In Jesus' terms, good trees have to produce good fruit.

Jesus showed us that connection between belief and action in the Gospel reading this morning. This passage is one of the hardest for us to hear. Jesus has traveled into Gentile territory and tried to stay in the shadows, something that never worked for him. Sure enough, a local woman came up, bowed down, and begged him to help her daughter. Jesus responded like any normal Jewish male at that time. He said that the children of Israel need to be fed first, not the dogs. The woman not only took the insult but she threw his words right back at him. Yes, Lord, but even the dogs get the crumbs. We gasp and say, is this really Jesus? Do what's right, Jesus. And he did. He healed her daughter. Mark reinforces the point that Gentiles can be part of the Jesus movement by including another healing story right after that, a deaf Gentile man with a speech impediment. (As an aside, in these two stories you can see how Mark always has Jesus use words to cast out demons for spiritual healing. Physical healing always comes through the touch of Jesus.)

Right beliefs. Right actions. Faith and works together. What caused so many people from all over the political spectrum to eulogize John McCain was the close connection between what he believed and what he did, and the moral soundness of his words and actions. It's what we call integrity. What causes so many people to give up in the current political climate is what happened days later in the Senate.

That's why I continue to say that the church in general, and the Episcopal Church in particular, has a lot to teach our culture. It is not only that our liturgy reminds us of both the transcendence and the immanence of God, or cathedrals that reveal the beauty of human creation. It is that we differ on what we believe and how we act and what we should do, but we still come together because we put Christ at the center. With Christ at the center, community becomes more important than partisanship. We know that we are all in this together. With Christ at the center, we stand in a circle around him, and there are no sides. With Christ at the center, we know that all human beings are all children of God, beloved of God, redeemed by God. So go out holding that faith in your heart. Then show the world what powerful works you can do.

[Pentecost 16: James 2:1-10; Mark 7:24-37. The article from the Albany NY *Times Union* is entitled "Facing a schism: A bishop, gay marriage and the Episcopal diocese of Albany."]