

No King or Power but God
based on 1Samuel 8:1-10, David Jahnke, 5/1/16

I have been talking a lot about politics and I will not stop today. There was no separation between religion and politics in Jesus' day or his mind. Both involve our values, beliefs and worldview so to try and separate the two is counter to the gospel.

Politics is our faith in action and religion is the root and resting place of our politics.¹ Both are about relationships with others and God. Jesus intimately tied these two together with his two most important commands of loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—religion-- and our neighbor as ourselves—politics. And James does as well when he says true religion is caring for orphans and widows.

Now some of you may be nervous about religion in government because you believe in the separation of church and state. I do as well! There should be no state religion anywhere in God's rich and diverse world. Only when the Kingdom is consummated and we all know who God is (and how foolish were the limits we had put on Him), only then we will all be one in faith and politics. Until then, freedom of conscience and religion must reign on earth.

Some of you are perturbed by politics entering into the realm of faith. You do not like your pastor or fellow Christians being "too political." I understand where this is coming from and I believe sermons and Christians should present the Kingdom of heaven without insisting or even implying that there is one human political way to get there. There, in fact, is no human way to get to heaven and we are all struggling to pursue God's way there.

One amazing thing about our passage from Samuel is that God allowed the Israelites to follow their own political path even though this meant they were rejecting God. Their communal life and international relations should have been completely governed by God's Word and Spirit. But God granted them the freedom to trust and follow a political pathway.

¹ Borrowed from Anne Lamott's pastor's belief that "Joy is peace on its feet and peace is joy at rest."

And if God, the only King of the world, allows people to have other kings, we had better not condemn others who tend to place more trust in humans than God. God understands this human tendency and still accepts those inclined in such a way as long as their inclinations are not demonic. So we must accept and engage those who are more passionate about politics and humanity than about God and religion. In fact, this is probably the case for some of you as it is for one of my good seminary friend who posts 5-10 political posts a day on Facebook! This reflects an admirable passion for justice and concrete action.

God warned the Israelites, however, about their fears and their desire for power. The Israelites wanted a King to unify and organize “us” the Israelites and then conquer “them”-- the nations. This was a distinct and harsh separation from their religion—from their covenant with God to be a blessing to the nations. Instead this move away from religion would not only harm their neighbors but endanger their own children.

So our religion and politics must remain intertwined. If not, politics becomes self-interested, self-exalting and divisive and condemnatory. Politics that forgets we are all one in God hurts our neighbors and endangers our own children’s future.

We must note that there was good reason for the Israelites to want better organization. Samuel’s sons, just like Eli’s sons before them, were terrible leaders. The Philistines were threatening again and they had had enough of winning a battle here and losing another there. It was time to organize and become a powerhouse! Just like many today sense it’s time to “make America great again!”

I heard a piece on NPR about commonalities between George Wallace and Donald Trump’s campaigns, not primarily connected to race by the way. It’s about a loss of power. In Wallace’s day, black people were no longer accepting their second class citizenship which meant that whites were losing their privilege and the power that went with it. This was about the only power and privilege that poor southern whites had.

Similar things are happening in our generation with the dominant culture of white Protestantism losing influence and privilege due to a growing pluralism and globalism. The white middle class has been stagnant economically for a decade with far too many losing ground. And at times like these, people desire strong leaders and a centralization of power that will be for them. So on the left we have a growing socialism and on the right a nationalism bordering on fascism.

In the middle of the political chaos of his day, Samuel chose to pray.

I was reading the very funny and very liberal Christian Anne Lamott this week who followed Samuel's lead when she was feeling lost in the desert of the Bush years (which is where some of you republicans may locate yourselves after eight years of Obama.) She talked to a priest friend of hers about how they could survive. And Father Tom said, "Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe..." Walking makes for great prayer.

We are in a kind of political and economic desert in America. And instead of becoming reactionary, we ought to instead get still. Because prayer is where politics and religion; where the human and the divine; where the world and heaven become one.

Last week we read about Philip and Andrew meeting Jesus. After that, he called Nathanael and told him, "...you will see 'heaven open, and angels...ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'" This recalls Jacob's dream of a ladder connecting heaven and earth. Prayer is that ladder; prayer is Christ; prayer-- Christ is the place where the deepest longings of humanity reach heaven and where and how heaven is manifest on earth.

Lamott recalls a quote from the impressionist Henri Matisse who said, "I am not sure if I believe in God or not but the essential thing is to put oneself in a frame of mind which is close to that of prayer." Prayer recognizes the divine in the profane and lifts it up to heaven and magnifies it on earth. Prayers in the form of loving deeds manifest the Kingdom here on earth.

So we must get back to prayer. If we are not sure how or why, we must learn and learning involves practice! I just mentioned the why along with prayer being the only way to true fulfillment and contentment. How to pray is as simple as knowing that God is present and conversing with God in our thoughts!

In the middle of Samuel's prayer, God tells him to listen to the people. So our leaders— and that includes all of us in positions of economic, social, educational and moral power— we have to start listening to those with complaints and listening to each other, rather than just talking past each other for the sake of our agenda.

Young Sanders supporters who are crushed with college debt and poor job prospects need to be heard. Middle-aged Trump supporters pushed out of their

jobs by cutbacks and unable to find jobs because of their age need to be heard. Could you imagine them hearing each other? Hard to even fathom. But if we could get them in the same room, we could get the meeting and conversation started with the old Woody Guthrie song, “Jesus Christ for president” which Sanders supporters would love and then move onto “Lead on O King Eternal, the Day of March Has Come” or “Fight the Good Fight.” One thing I know is that Jesus would get them talking in a new spirit of hope and reconciliation.

When the Israelites were crying out for a human King, they were really crying out for Jesus. And I think the same is true for Trump and Sanders supporters today. They want their deepest hopes met. May their prayers be heard through Christ, the King of Kings. Our role is to broker the peace and help manifest their prayer as his body.

Anne Lamott’s pastor said that joy is peace on its feet and peace is joy at rest. Knowing the King of Kings in our hearts and minds brings inner peace which then becomes joyful politics. And the joy of knowing Christ’s reign out there grants us peace in our hearts and homes.

So remember that the politicians only have power because God allows it as Jesus told Pilate. God is in charge. Let this knowledge bring peace that passes understanding and send you out into the world with joy every day. While out there, listen to others and learn. Most importantly, learn to pray at all times, with every thought, word and deed...through Jesus Christ our Lord...and God’ people say

This is what makes our public and political life a joy and our

I cannot tell you where I would be without a trust that God is King.

listens in the middle of prayer. He takes the petitions of his people to God and brings Word from God back to his people.

I read this in quote from Henri Matisse:

But when we take a unify, divide and conquer approach—a unify around us, divide ourselves from them and then conquer approach, God lets us know that we have utterly and completely rejected and abandoned him.