

ELECTION DAY AND THE BEATITUDES



Luke 6:31 "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Sadly, we live in a divided nation --- and this is never more evident than in an election year. The news stations clearly divide the country into blue states on the one side and the red

states on the other, and throughout this election season, supporters from the two major political parties have seemed pitted against each other. The bitter animosity in this election is overwhelming at times. There are so many personal attacks, insults, abusive language, name calling, outrageous claims, profound untruths, intolerance, racism, and disrespect --- and sometimes there has been even a clash on policies, but it is mostly just personal and divisive. The media has sadly fostered these divisions at times, declaring that we have the coastal elites on the shores versus the simply folk of Middle America on the Great Plains; or our multi-culturally diverse cities are pitted against the rural homogenous countryside. And there is a real threat of more violence, of intimidation, of social unrest, racial injustice, and even talk of civil war. We are sadly a divided nation.

So, what exactly is the Church's role in all of this? What are we as good Christians supposed to do in the midst of all this acrimony and anxiety? Are we to self-righteously take one side or the other in this political divide? Are we to justly condemn the views of one party and claim God for the other? Or are we to avoid political discussions altogether, as so many do, in order to keep the peace? But there is no peace. Or are we to listen to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel. To do unto others as we have them do unto us.

We all need to stop the name calling, the self-righteousness, and the fear mongering, which are evident on both sides of the political divide. We need to respect the dignity of every human being, as we pledge at our Baptisms. We need to listen to each other, as hard as that may be, and to understand where each other is coming from. For this so-called culture war is not really a struggle between the enlightened few and the ignorant, bigoted masses, so much as it is a built-in tension between two very old, venerable, moral traditions that go back for centuries, as far back as the French Revolution. So, beneath all the name-calling and fear-mongering, we need to understand each other's concerns, for in the end, these moral traditions need each other to be whole.

On the one hand we have what we might call 'the progressive moral party.' The catch phrase "moral freedom" perhaps best captures this esteemed political tradition. It recognizes the individual conscience as the ultimate authority and holds that in a diverse society, each person should have the right to lead their own authentic life and make up their own mind about moral matters. Indeed, such an attitude inspired the American Revolution against an absolute monarch, or tyrant.

This ethos has a pretty clear sense of right and wrong, where it is wrong to try to impose your morality or your religious faith on others. We have freedom of expression and

religion in this country, to be who we want to be. If so, then society goes wrong when it prevents gay people from marrying whom they want, when it restricts the choices women can make about their own bodies, when it demeans transgender people by restricting where they can go to the bathroom and what sports they can play after school. So nowadays, if a woman decides to get an abortion, then we should respect her freedom of choice. If a teenager concludes they are nonbinary, or decides to transition to another gender, then we should celebrate their efforts to live a life that is authentic to who they really are. In this ethos, society is rich in its diversity.

This moral tradition has made modern life so much better for so many others. It freed the slaves in this country. Women have gained more social freedom to craft their own lives and to be respected for the choices they make. People in the L.G.B.T.Q. communities have greater opportunities to lead open and flourishing lives. There are now fewer restrictions that repress and discriminate against people from marginalized groups. Yes, there's less conformity in this model, for sure, but there is more tolerance and more respect for our differences.

However, there are weaknesses in this position as well. The moral progressive ethos puts tremendous emphasis on individual conscience and freedom of choice. Can a society really thrive if there is no shared moral order or values? What happens when

people are free to leave their societal commitments based on some momentary vision of their own personal needs? If people find their moral beliefs only by turning inward, they may lose contact with community standards of truth, beauty, and moral excellence that have been handed down by tradition, by history, and some say, by God. A lot of people may revert to what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls "emotivism": What is morally right is what feels right to me. Thus emotivism has a tendency to devolve into self-indulgence and self-righteousness. And if we're all creating our own moral criteria based on our feelings, we're probably going to grade ourselves on a forgiving curve.

Self-created identities are also fragile. We need to have our identities constantly affirmed by others if we are to feel secure in them. People who live within this moral system are often hypersensitive to sleights that they perceive as oppression. Politics often devolves then into identity wars, as each different group seeks recognition of its needs and its interests.

The critics of moral freedom say that while it opens up lifestyle choices, it also devolves into what one moralist calls "liquid modernity." When everybody defines their own values, the basic categories of life turn fluid. You wind up in a world in which a Supreme Court nominee like Ketanji Brown Jackson has to

dodge the seemingly basic question of what a woman is. I don't blame her. I don't know how to answer that question anymore, either, so much has changed, and so fast with our liquid modernity.

On the other side, we have what we might call 'the conservative moral party' that has a very different conception of human nature, and the world, and how a good society is formed. People who subscribe to this worldview believe that individuals are embedded in a larger and pre-existing moral order of some kind, in which there is real objective moral truth, independent of the knower, beyond our feelings, where there is a real sense of objective right and wrong, and that there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant out there giving values to our lives, other than ourselves.

In this moral tradition, ultimate authority is outside the self. And for many people who share this worldview, the ultimate source of authority is God's truth, as revealed in their Scriptures and traditions, or the ultimate moral authority is in the community with its slowly changing cultural values. We're in a different moral world here than the progressive side, with emphasis here on conformity, agreement, deference, and appreciation of our moral tradition. Here is perhaps a loftier vision of the perfect good, but it also takes a dimmer view of human nature: left to our own devices, people will tend to be

selfish and shortsighted. They will rebel against the established order and seek autonomy. The healthier life, in this tradition, is one lived within limits – limits imposed from the outside, by God's commandments, by the customs and sacred truths of a culture and its institutions. These limits on choice enable us to have a secure identity and to have secure attachments, even in the midst of rapid social change, but these limits tend to favor the privileged.

The strengths of each of these moral traditions is pretty obvious, and so are the weaknesses. Each can lead to a rigid moral code that people with power use to justify systems of oppression, where individuals not in our moral order are seen as inferior and can be abused. Both of these moral traditions have deep intellectual and historical roots. Both have a place in any pluralistic society. Still conservatives currently feel under massive assault from progressive cultural elites, and small-town traditionalists may feel their entire way of life is being threatened by globalism and change. Many perceive that they are losing power and prestige as cultural forces evolve and change. This has produced a moral panic amongst many of us. Consumed by the passion of the culture wars, many traditionalists and conservatives have surprisingly adopted a hypermasculine warrior ethos, to defend our values, to fight for us, to battle and defeat the other, an ethos that is diametrically opposed to the

Sermon on the Mount, even though they often claim that their moral order derives from Scripture. Unable to get people to embrace their moral order through persuasion, many now seek to impose their moral order through politics, and are unwilling to accept the results if they do not win.

The important question here is, can we and will we acknowledge that both moral traditions need each other? As usual, politics is a competition between partial truths. The progressive ethos is wonderful in many respects, but liberal societies need non liberal, cultural institutions if they are to thrive, if people are to feel secure in their identities and commitments. America needs institutions built on the "conservative" ethos to create social bonds that are more permanent than individual choice and emotion. It needs that ethos to counter the narcissistic tendencies in our culture and in ourselves. It needs that ethos to preserve a sense of the sacred, the idea that there are some truths so transcendentally right that they are always true. Firmness in keeping with the right, however, always has to be accompanied by humility about how much any one of us can ever see of the right, for we all have limited vision.

Finally, we need this conservative ethos, because morality is not only an individual thing; it's something between people that binds us together. Even individualistic progressives say it

takes a village to raise a child, but the village needs to have a shared moral sense of how to raise it. And perhaps this is it: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. And stop the name calling, the self-righteousness, and the fear mongering. AMEN.