

**Sunday, June 9, 2024**  
**Third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5, Year B)**

1 Samuel 8.4-11, 16-20; Mark 3.20-24

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1161958871711374>

*(Sermon begins at about 23:40)*

**“Intersection of Religion and Politics”**

Unless you have been living in isolation and under a complete media black-out, you cannot help but know that we are smack dab in the middle of an election cycle—particularly with the Republican National Convention just over a month away and the Democratic National Convention a month after that. All marking the beginning of the final push to the General Election on November 5<sup>th</sup>. Although, more and more, how can you tell? Life seems to have become one never-ending election cycle. As a result, politics increasingly has become front and center in our lives. That being the case, whether we like it or not, that means politics is also increasingly front and center in our religious lives.

I can just hear the collective gasps, if not audible at least expressed in the internal thoughts of some present. “What? You can’t talk about politics in church!” Before we continue, I need to disabuse you of that notion. Admittedly, there is a misconception that clergy are not allowed to discuss politics from the pulpit. Perhaps that stems from a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the separation of church and state. Which actually has nothing to do with the subject at hand. Separation of church and state merely means the government cannot establish an official state religion, nor can it interfere in the operations of religious institutions.

If anything, the idea that churches cannot deal with issues of politics likely derives from certain IRS restrictions placed on religious institutions regarding endorsement of political candidates. Which is the only legal restriction truly in place. The reality is, anyone can talk about anything of a political nature from the pulpit as long as they do not endorse a candidate for elected office. You can talk about general political principles. You can talk about and even criticize governmental laws and policies. You can even endorse proposition measures from the pulpit. You just can’t endorse a candidate.

That said, there really is a strong case for the relationship between religion and politics. Particularly between Christianity and politics. Wikipedia defines politics as “the way that people living in groups make planned decisions. Politics is about making agreements between people so that they can live together in groups such as tribes, cities, or countries . . . In everyday life, the term ‘politics’ refers to the way that countries are governed, and to the ways that governments make rules and laws to manage the human society properly. Politics can also be seen in other groups, such as in companies, clubs, schools, and churches.”<sup>1</sup> And the Merriam-Webster dictionary provides an even more generic definition of politics as “the total complex of relations between people living in society.”<sup>2</sup> By its very nature, religion and particularly religious institutions, are solidly part of and influential in the relations between people living in society.

So rather than gasp and clutch our pearls at the mention of politics in a religious setting, let's look at what this intersection of religion and politics means for us as people of faith.

Our Old Testament reading from First Samuel addresses this intersection in no uncertain terms. Before we get there, we need to understand that up until the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Hebrews did not have any formal governmental structure. They were God's people. God was the sole ruler of the people. When conflict arose in the exercise of God's commandments, elders and prophets appointed by God would intervene. But this was far from any formalized system of government. However, in times of crisis, such as war, God would appoint a judge to serve as the formal leader of the people. The judge was charged with rescuing the people from their enemies and establishing justice. Once the crisis was over, the office of judge would be set aside until needed again.

Samuel was one such judge. In fact, he had a dual role—as judge and as prophet. In the passage we heard this morning, Samuel is getting old. He has been a good judge during the ongoing oppression by the neighboring Philistines. It is becoming apparent that he needs to step back and appoint a successor. In some instances, the son of a judge might succeed the judge. Knowing this, the people come to Samuel, concerned that his sons Joel and Abijah were not faithful to God's ways and were known to be corrupt. As such, they would not be good choices. Rather, they wanted to completely abandon the practice of having a judge to lead them in times of crisis and establish a king to be their permanent ruler. While this may sound good on the surface—establish a permanent position to allow for some continuity—it was just not in keeping with God's vision. Up until now, God had been the recognized ruler of the people. So, to request a king was tantamount to rejecting God's leadership. As God says to Samuel, “they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.”

Recognizing that they might completely abandon God, God gives in to their demands. But he does warn Samuel what having a human king would mean: “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.” In other words, a king will have absolute power. He can and will do whatever he wants, which may not be to the benefit of the people. As the saying goes, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” There were no checks and balances. These kings were not constitutional monarchs, figureheads like England's King Charles. They were effectively absolute dictators, like Vladimir Putin or Kim Jung Un. Samuel warns the people of the potential ramifications, but they do not listen: “we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” So there you have it. The first instance of the intersection of religion and politics. And its right there in the Bible.

While not part of today's story, Samuel is the last of the judges and God appoints Saul as king. Saul starts off as a good king, uniting the twelve tribes into the United Kingdom of Israel. But in due course, Saul becomes more and more corrupt by his power and wealth. Just as God had warned. And alas, that is what happened to one degree or another with nearly every king that followed. Even those considered to be great kings, such as David and Solomon, abused their

power in various ways. The people made their choice as to what they wanted. And they ultimately paid the price in losing their freedom and self-determination—first to their own monarchs and then to enemies such as Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome, who took advantage of a nation weakened by corrupt kings and essentially decimated the nation and enslaved the people of Israel.

This is what amounts to a cautionary tale of what happens when the people abandon God's ways and go after what is new and shiny: all the other nations have kings, why can't we have one, too? The model of not having a formal government and relying on judges in times of crisis may not have been practical or sustainable in the long run. But the people were acting on a whim and not considering the implications of their decision. How God had their interests at heart; a human king, not so much. The people allowed their self-centered and self-serving desires to take priority over God's laws which were specifically designed to protect their interests.

Our Gospel reading for today does provide some guidance as to the place of faith in dealing with opposition—a naturally occurring aspect of communal life in general, and of politics in particular. Jesus is engaged in the ministry he is called to do: healing the sick and casting out demons. The people are so in need of what Jesus has to offer. After all, they are not getting what they need from the religious authorities. Nor are they getting it from the civil and political authorities. They are all too concerned with their own self-interests, with amassing wealth and power, to care about the common folk. Although when the people start flocking to Jesus for the help they need, the religious authorities become concerned. Instead of figuring out how they might change the way they do things to meet the needs of their constituents, they turn on Jesus. They accuse him of being in league with Beelzebul—the devil. Even though he is doing good works, they accuse him of being evil. Rather than change how they operate, they instead doubled down and became more entrenched in their positions. Trying to protect their own interests. And when Jesus produced results where they couldn't, they resorted to name calling, to demonizing him. Frankly, not unlike what we see more and more in our own halls of government. That those in power become so entrenched in their positions and protecting their interests, to the exclusion of all else. Resulting in a complete unwillingness to work together, to try to find a compromise position. Which is, at its heart, the bedrock of any (small d) democratic political system.

Jesus makes two observations that are worth noting. Observations that are directly applicable to many areas of human society, and particularly in the area of politics. First, in response to the childish and unproductive name calling and demonizing engaged in by his opponents, and in response to becoming so entrenched in their own positions and in towing the party line, Jesus responds with "if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." That ultimately, the only way for the system to work is for everyone to put aside their personal agendas and cults of personality and be willing to work together for the wellbeing of all. Not for the wellbeing of those in power. Or those seeking to be in power. For to do so only serves to make a religion out of politics. And a rigid, fundamentalist one at that. Witness the rise of Christian Nationalism and its toxic perversion of the Gospel.

While there is a bit of a disconnect in the action in today's Gospel, there is a piece that might be overlooked, but which actually provides the key to engaging in productive and effective politics—regardless of the setting. And provides the rationale for religion and the church as being an integral partner in the exercise of politics—regardless of form. When informed that his family is looking for him, presumably to try to get him to stop bucking the system, Jesus responds, “Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” In other words, my affiliations are not what is important—not family, not wealth, not power, not social position, not political party. What is important is being faithful to what God has commanded. And for Jesus, that always, always, always boiled down to the two great commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. As people of faith, as those who consider themselves to be brothers and sisters of Christ, this should also be the litmus test for our own lives. Including in the exercising of our rights and responsibility to have a say in how our broader society operates. And, of course, one of the key means of providing for how our society operates is through politics. That is the very definition of politics.

As we listen to the political rhetoric inundating the airwaves and our social media feeds, it becomes pretty obvious pretty fast that some seeking to be elected to serve us and to provide for the wellbeing of our nation and our people are not always concerned with our best interests. Rather, they are concerned with their own self-interests. We would do well to remember our scripture readings for today and what they have to say to us about our common life. To heed God's warning to Samuel about the dangers of those who would be king—dangers we have seen played out in their own way in our own time. And we would do well to remember Jesus' admonition that as his siblings and as children of God, we are to continually seek to do God's will, to use God's laws to point us in the right direction in our own decision-making.

As Guy Erwin, the former bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America once said in a clergy conference, “we are God's hands and God's feet in the world. We are also God's checkbook and God's vote at the ballot box.” As people of faith, we bring our religious perspectives with us into the voting booth. Our religious beliefs influence, if not determine, how we vote. As such, for us Christians, religion and politics are inextricably linked. As we proceed through this election cycle, may we be particularly intentional in our assessment of whatever issues and candidates are on the ballot, and prayerfully consider how our choices at the ballot box truly reflect who we are and what we believe and hold dear as children of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Politics,” Wikipedia, June 7, 2024, <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics>.

<sup>2</sup> “Politics,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, June 7, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics>.