

Sermon – 13th Pentecost
Matthew 16:21-28 and Romans 12:9-21
August 30, 2020
“On Speeches”

In the past week, and over the next 9, you will if you care to, be “speeched” by people vying for elected office, particularly by the candidates who want to move into or extend their stay in the White House. These speeches will have been crafted and poured over by legions of pollsters, marketing experts, and political consultants. Yet by giving them President Trump and former Vice President Biden will each lend their name and character to what you hear.

Both candidates will articulate positions on issues ranging from the Corona Virus pandemic, the simmering emotions over the criminal justice system, our culture’s impact on and responsibility for the environment, health care in general and now renewed emphasis on public health so “next time we’re ready.” Along the way speeches will sprinkle in references trade agreements, abortion, education, immigration and energy policies.

The Bible has perspectives on all this though I dare say its not going to hand a candidate for office a talking point on it. In our Lutheran tradition, we believe God rules “*as though with the left hand*” by providing for and protecting the citizens of nations and “*as with the right hand*” through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Martin Luther even goes so far as to include “good government” in his list of what is included in “our daily bread.”

Yet by design or urgency it seems candidate's speeches these days are less about their policies and proposals and more about them. Speeches seem to be about two subjects - "me" and "I" and if that is diverted from it is simply to plunge into some "*why you ought to be glad I'm not like him/her*" outburst. Well, the Bible has precedent for that too, exhibited – a better word might be "paraded" - in our a couple of our lessons today.

Prophets were speech makers and they could be a bit long-winded. Jeremiah in particular had accumulated a lot of pent-up anger for the way folks ignored what he had to say. So in our lesson today he pleads his own cause in a speech of sorts to God – and like a politician doesn't miss an opportunity to beat his own drum a bit..."*think of how I suffer reproach for your sake*" he says. "*When your words came, I ate them, they were my joy and my heart's delight*" (as opposed to my enemies who dismiss your words). "*I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them*" and he caps it off by saying "*Why is my pain unending.*"

The Psalms include a few examples of speeches too – and while Jeremiah is never credited with writing any of them – Psalm 26 sure sounds like it could have come from him. Listen to what the Psalmist says about himself for a minute..."*I have led a blameless life, I have trusted in you without wavering.*" "*I walk continually in your truth...I do not sit with deceitful men nor do I consort with hypocrites.*"

Boy if that isn't a modern politician or consultant laying out a strategy that they are "not like all the other politicians" who is going to go "drain the swamp" and "fight for what is right" I don't know what is. Can you imagine the 30 second spots of feel good flattery a pollster could whip up with a candidate who says; "*I wash my hands in innocence*" and "*my feet stand on level ground.*"

Applied to faith, if Jeremiah 15 and Psalm 26 be our guide, their message would urge us to “be that guy or gal” who trains every impulse to be pure and every result just and true. But then there is the speech Jesus gave in our gospel today – and it couldn’t offer more of a contrast. Peter gets the first crack at a response and he channels Jeremiah and the Psalmist by admonishing Jesus to just steer clear of deceitful, evil men and avoid hypocrites as they had. That Jesus will have nothing to do with that suggestion should not surprise us – he was after all the man who said “*I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*”, and “*those who are well have no need of a physician.*”

If cynicism fits hand in glove with politics as they say, then realism fits hand in glove with being a Christ follower. Avoiding God’s plan earns Peter a dandy of a rebuke – Jesus all but calls him “Satan.” Following Jesus is not about “finding your cause/your cross” and carrying it – Peter is not averse to sacrifice – but those kinds of crosses, the self-styled ones keep you crucified. You have to keep at them all the time and never let up – you have to fight, fight, fight as the politicians like to tell us they will do – strain, strain, strain as the Psalmist tells us to do.

Following Jesus is coming under his cross, “losing yourself” in its shadow. Jesus’ speech is glaringly frank yet astonishingly hope filled. Jesus’ speech promises rewards that is true, but not in the way elected officials speak of them. In defense of our public officials their task is and should not be to reward some citizens at the expense of others but serve the common good of all.

Jesus promises reward for those who lose their interests and their interest in anything but the cross of their salvation. Rewarding each one according to what they have done might be fine if we were all Jeremiah or the very earnest writer of

Psalm 26. But we're not – we are all in need of physicians. Our reward is precisely NOT for what we've done but in whom we've believed and press on in faith despite the things we've done.

We as citizens of this nation and simultaneously citizens of the kingdom of God, have a job to do. Government “of” the people means that we the governed are responsible for whom we elect. If we too infrequently vote self-sacrifice and too often self-interest, our government will pursue individual instead of common good. But you, Christian citizen, must vote in a way peculiar to your creed. When you vote, you must listen earnestly and humbly and trustingly to the one who approved this message and lent his character to it, for he authored it....”*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world...but lose their soul”.*

When you vote you must listen to Christ, whose calls for love to be genuine across age, race, class, and stage of life. You must listen to Christ, who didn't chase honor but gave it away. You must listen to Christ, who was patient when blessing eluded him. To lack some personal comfort or benefit is not, as many suggest today, a sign of God's disfavor. Listen, dear Christian citizen, to Christ, the messenger who seeks what is noble for all. Listen for Christ, who did not avenge on a whim but gave room and time for the judgement of God, and never shrank from the hard task of turning enemies into friends by feeding, clothing, and caring for them.

Catholic Bishop Allen Vigneron, of the Diocese of Oakland once said; *“as faithful citizens, we (Christians) are called to bring our laws into conformity with what we know of the nature of God. If we fail, our way of life will become counter-cultural, always a difficult situation for Christians...one that the Lord himself predicted for us. But even if our efforts meet with success, our work is far from done, for we would still be living in a society where many accept a set of convictions that is ultimately detrimental to the integrity of human life...your mission will then be, as it always has been, to be a light and leaven for the new creation established in Christ”*.

In other words, true winners do not concern themselves with they might somehow gain – because in Jesus they have found something they can never lose. AMEN