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Say It With Psalms
4. Try Me, Test Me: Reflections on an Election

Psalm 17:1-7 NRSV 1Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. 2From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right. 3If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. 4As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. 5My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped. 6I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. 7Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

Micah 6:8 NRSV He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Philippians 4:8-9 NRSV Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I had an interesting conversation last week with a man who over the course of 25 years of our acquaintance has been both a good friend and a mentor to me, someone who always makes me think and who, like the best of friends, isn't simply an echo chamber for what I think. He's an attorney, highly respected in his county seat town and in the statewide bar where he is known for his thoughtful writings on legal ethics and malpractice. He has been a leader in his local and statewide political party. He's a Republican and one of the most thoughtful men I know.

He said something in our conversation that has stayed with me: that in this election season he was a bit tired of reading so many religious commentators' pieces

that asked the question “What would Jesus do?” His point was that it is too easy for people to take their own predilections and beliefs and project them onto Jesus. And, of course, that is nothing new: one author in the 1920s said that if Jesus were here today he’d be in sales because He knew how to close a deal. I also recently read about a preacher who confidently asserted that if Jesus were here today He would be leading an army to kill Muslims. Painters through the ages have painted Jesus as if He was their contemporary; you only have to look at some of the Dutch Renaissance paintings to see how silly, really, it is to depict Jesus in the garb of a 16th century Amsterdam businessman. My friend’s suggestion in the face of this universal tendency to project onto Jesus our own fears, foibles, and failings was to ask not “What would Jesus do?” but simply “What *did* Jesus do?”

That strikes me as a good tack, and it fits oh-so-well with our classical Disciples of Christ insistence that people should be encouraged to study and learn as much as they can about the faith but then ultimately have the responsibility of making up their own minds about matters. As our Psalm for the day puts it, by doing the very best we can to understand who Jesus was and who God is, as reflected in scripture, tradition, and reason, we can thereby ask God to “try us and test us” so that we do not settle for shallow answers, we do not simply give in to partisan language on the left or right, we do not indulge the desire to demonize and dehumanize a political opponent. At the same time, my friend also said that he had heard far too few sermons that sought to help people to understand racial, political, and other issues and reminded me that “Being timid is [too often] confused with being humble.” With all of that in mind, then, and with the hope and prayer that what I have to offer is humble and yet not timid, let us

begin this morning, then, by asking “What **did** Jesus do?” in the hopes that that question can indeed “try and test us” as we prayerfully consider how to be faithful in this election season. What can we learn from what Jesus did?

We could spend the rest of the day picking out individual verses about what Jesus said and did as recorded in the gospels, or as cited by Paul. But this morning, let’s look simply at the one thing that Jesus described as a summation of everything that is expected of a person of faith. I’m sure many of you know the lines: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments **hang all the law and the prophets.**” And in the Sermon on the Mount, he offered the same idea in a slightly different form: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” This one, of courses, goes by the name The Golden Rule.

My friends, we have heard both “love your neighbor as yourself” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” so many times that we are in danger of not fully seeing the radicalness of what Jesus is saying about who we should be, how we should think, and what we should do. These are not just nice bromides for a cross-stitched pillow, not just gauzy inspirational pictures to post on Facebook. No, these are powerful, radical, counter-cultural things that ought to affect everything we do and say including how we vote.

It was a philosopher by the name of John Rawls who showed me just how radical these notions of “do unto others” and “love your neighbor as yourself” were in

his book of a generation ago called A Theory of Justice.¹ It's a dense, 600 page book but its central premise is simple and striking: to act truly morally in the deepest sense, you have to act as if you don't know what your position in society is, what your class or race or ethnicity or orientation or economic status is. In other words, "loving your neighbor as yourself" or "doing unto others as you would wish done to you" may well be relatively easy if you are a 21st century American, or if you white and heterosexual, or if you are economically well-off, or if you are male and not therefore among the 65% of American women who report being physically or verbally assaulted at some point.² But Rawls' challenge – and why Jesus' words are so radical – becomes much more difficult if you are, say, an orphaned child fleeing Syria with nothing but the clothes on your back, or a woman raped and left with a child in Central America and your choice is to seek a dangerous walk across a border or to become a prostitute, or you are a transgendered teenager misunderstood and bullied on every side to the point where suicide looks attractive.

As you ponder how you will fill out your ballot for this election, you will find no instructions in the Bible about how to vote on the Colorado constitutional amendments.

¹I am aware, of course, that I have oversimplified Rawls' work in what follows and that his central aim is actually more to construct and defend an understanding of how a truly just society would be organized. I also understand that while his work acknowledges ethics explicitly based on Jesus' "Golden Rule," his task is not an apologia for such points of view and much more a hoped-for renewing of the deontological strand in Western philosophical ethics as a resource for making decisions about actual issues of justice before society. At the same time, I do believe that his notion of "original position" is a strikingly helpful way of understanding Jesus' counsel.

²<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/22/us/she-never-spoke-of-it-to-her-husband-then-she-heard-the-trump-tape.html?smid=tw-share>

There's no verse in the Bible that you can cite that tells you which judges to retain.

There is nothing to be found in scripture with a clear and precise word about the how to vote on that agonizing situation of whether or not the terminally ill should be allowed to end their lives. You'll receive no scriptural guidance on whether petitions for amendments should need a 55% majority. And there will be nothing telling you whether to vote for Mr. Trump or Mrs. Clinton or one of the **twenty** other presidential candidates on the ballot including the candidate of the American Nutrition Party (I didn't even know that was a thing. I wonder if they are in favor of barbecue?) In fact, the Bible has nothing about democratic elections at all. The four thousand years over which it was compiled and written down knew instead of kings and queens, emperors and Caesars, governors and prefects, but nothing of electing leaders. None of these things you will find in the Bible, none of these things you will find when examining "what did Jesus say" or "What did Jesus do?"

But what you will find is some very, very clear words by our Lord and Savior about making sure that when you do anything – including vote – you are required to ask yourself if this is something you would want done to you or said of you. And the Lord asks you to think hard about that and to remember that your neighbor **IS** that sad Syrian child and that desperate Central American mother and that bullied teenager – and to then ask "if I were in their shoes, in their place, what would I want done to me?" The Lord asks you to think hard about how these ones are also your neighbors and asks that you seriously confront what it means, then, to love them as you yourself would want to be loved.

Actually, that way of putting it is not quite right. I said that Jesus **asks** us to think

about how we would want to be loved if our lives looked very different, but the reality is: this is not a request, it's an **imperative**. Those of you who regularly travel U.S. 24 to Woodland Park and beyond know that in early October, 26th Street between U.S. 24 and Colorado Avenue was closed for repairs for a week or so. At the beginning of that project, the highway folks put up a couple of those electric signs to alert drivers to the situation. The wording on those signs said this: "26th St. Closed. Other routes *suggested*." Those signs amused me, because although that word, "suggested," was nice and soft and seemingly polite, it was just not correct. The street was closed, blocked off, torn up. It was not just a "suggestion" that I go another way, advice I could take or leave if I wanted; no, there was no alternative to finding another route. It was an imperative. It was **required**.

Jesus said that "loving your neighbor as yourself" was a summation of everything said by the "law and the prophets." And one of those prophets' words we heard this morning. But notice, his words do not suggest an alternative route, they are not simply *suggestions*: "What does the Lord **require** of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?" **Require**. We may not wish that were so. Goodness knows some days I sure wish they were not so. We may be oh-so-tempted to give into our fear and our anger and to demonize those we don't like. We may be oh-so-tempted to cheer on personal attacks when one candidate's supporters are called "deplorable" and another candidate's supporters threaten the very foundation of American democracy. But the God of the prophets, the God of our Lord, doesn't *advise* us not to do these things, He **requires** it. God requires that we keep in mind in all our words and actions, including voting, that concern for the poor and immigrant are commanded of

scores of times in the Bible. God requires us to put our faith in God before our faith in any candidate.

You see, there is no perfect candidate in this election. There is no perfect proposition or amendment or initiative. We live in an imperfect world this side of heaven. But that fact never, ever excuses us from Jesus' clear words that "love of neighbor as self" and "doing unto others" are the imperatives commanded of us. If we ignore those in our words, our actions, our voting, we will be saying that we have decided that Jesus' words and the witness of God's prophets is indeed purely advisory and that we know better. I simply don't think, when all is said and done, that any of us want to claim that.

The Psalmist told us what should be our goal when we face our God: "if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress [and] I have avoided... the ways of the violent." You see, your Christian faith should never be separated from your choice about how to vote; we owe it to our God and we owe it to our forebears in the faith. The history of Christianity is marked with martyrs whose faith impelled them to denounce and work against the Roman Empire's practice of female infanticide, or who at risk to themselves stood up against too many governments who wanted to persecute and even murder Jews and gays and the handicapped and anyone who was "different," or who stood up against evil empires that made it a crime to be Christian, or who said – sometimes at the cost of their lives – that for a government to sanction human slavery is utterly and odiously wrong. *Count the number of times* that the Bible speaks of the poor and of doing justice to the oppressed; *count the number of times* that Jesus reminds us that our neighbor is to be treated with

fairness, justice, and kindness. And when governments help those things to happen, they are to be applauded. And when they don't, they are to be argued with at the ballot box and elsewhere. One writer puts it this way:

I... invite my Christian friends to spend more time paying attention to Jesus, quit asking what he would do, start asking what he **did** do – and work really hard at adjusting [our] political agenda to be one that expresses what Christians say in church about our loving and forgiving and gracious God.

What does that work look like for you? I hope it goes something like the writer of Phillipians' admonition: "... whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.... think about these things." And having thought about those things, having thought hard about who your neighbor is, having thought hard about what the Lord requires of you, having thought hard about how you would want to be treated no matter what your life was like, then, and only then, speak and act – and vote.