



A Theology of Voting

by Rev. Jim Chapman

In my faith tradition, the Apostle Paul, the first missionary among Jesus' followers, frequently used the word "body" to describe the church — a family of faith that is to be in community and in a community, implying that we are to be both Christian and citizen.

There is continual tension between those two which has, at times, led to civil initiatives or civil disobedience, like the sanctuary movement or the current actions along the border of Mexico to help migrants keep from dying of thirst or hunger, or the injustices around mass incarceration.

In one story Jesus told, the final judgment will be a series of questions. Jesus said, God will separate the sheep from the goats and say to the sheep "come into my presence for when I was thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was in prison, you stood up for me; when I was naked, you clothed me." The people who are invited into God's presence say, "Well, thank you, Lord, but when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or in prison or naked?" And God answered, "Whenever you did these things for any of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for me." And the people sent away say, "Well, we would have done that, too, Lord, if we'd known it was you!"

In the final judgment, the questions asked of us will not be, what church did you go to, were you baptized, not even did you believe. The questions at the final judgment will be about how we acted in the world, in this moment. God, it seems, is interested not just in the hereafter, but in the here-and-now.

I'm not going to tell my congregation which candidate to vote for or a ballot issue, but there is a theology of voting I'm not afraid to discuss! It is that Christians cannot vote simply on the basis of their own preferences or privilege. There is the whole "body" to consider, and there is the "the stranger" the one who is thirsty or in prison of whom I must be mindful.

It matters that we vote; it also matters how we vote. People of faith are called to be prophetic not partisan. So, the issues should be more important to us than the candidates or the parties they represent.

For instance, there are more than 2,000 verses in the Bible about poverty and freeing the poor and oppressed. So, we must consider how the election will affect the poor, the disadvantaged and the undocumented residents among us, like how our criminal justice laws affect people of color disproportionately or how our immigration laws break apart families.

How we vote impacts how our brothers and sisters are treated, and that, according to Jesus' parable ends up being the same as how we treat him. That is why voting matters to my faith tradition.

Here is a prayer from the Iona Community in Scotland: Living Christ, deep within our hearts the fire of justice burns; so we ask today for courage to walk in solidarity with all who are betrayed, exploited, driven from home, violated, imprisoned, detained without trial, mentally disabled and homeless, silenced or considered disposable. Until your Kingdom comes. Amen.