

In the name of God-Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is good to be back. They give me October off every year for the playoffs and the World Series. But at least I made it for the election, not the one last week but our vestry election today. It will be good to see the billboards for our eight candidates come down this afternoon. And one of the women candidates told me just last week that she had already returned 1/3 of the \$150,000 worth of clothes she had been given for the campaign, and would be returning the rest after the 1030 service today. You betcha. Elections are not only critical to the inner workings and hidden mechanisms of a parish church, where I grew up in the mountain political culture of Burke County, North Carolina, elections are also proof positive of the resurrection of the dead. On election night the cemetery precincts were often the last to report. It was not unlike All Saints Day when the loved ones were with us again. And there was one fellow I remember who once voted seven times for Terry Sanford, at seven different precincts, the race being to the swift. We will be more orderly here today I am sure. So don't be like the woman in Arkansas who said "Vote? Why vote? It only encourages them." She may be the same woman who during the Depression broke her arm while eating breakfast. She fell out of the persimmon tree.

Whether we are voting for President, Governor, or a vestry member, we have serious and sometimes prayerful choices and decisions to make, not unlike the

decision the Israelites had to make at Shechem when Joshua asked them to declare whom they would serve, the multiple gods of their ancestors or the Lord God, adding that as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. And we are offered a great deal of help in making those decisions, on radio, television, and in newspapers. I saw a full page/small print ad on October 30 called Voter's Guide for Serious Catholics. The Voter's Guide divides issues into two categories, non-negotiable and negotiable. The five absolutely non-negotiable issues are abortion, euthanasia/suicide, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, and gay marriage. It is clear from the guide that there are no exceptions to the position on abortion. A legislator who votes for the morning after pill for a rape victim is not, the guide tells us, worthy of our vote, nor welcome at the altar to receive communion. And of course those of us who like the Bill Clinton approach, that abortion should be legal and rare, are simply beyond the pale. Now I have to admit that even with my vivid imagination, I have never been able to come up with a justification for partial birth abortion. The fine print of the ad also tells us that a living will spelling out that perhaps I don't want to be coded at age 95 with pneumonia is tantamount to euthanasia or suicide. I don't know anyone who is in favor of human cloning, but for the life of me I cannot understand how my niece's committed life partnership somehow threatens or undermines my own marriage, as the Vatican insists it does. And what's wrong with embryonic stem cell research when those frozen left overs in test tubes are going to be discarded

anyway? And I could go on and on, but you probably get the picture. Now I have long thought that the Roman Catholic Church has over 2000 years done an enormous amount of good in this world, but deliver me from its voting guides. The best law teacher I ever knew, a veteran of Notre Dame and Texas, told me that once that he felt that the Supreme Court of the United States and the Church of Rome were incapable of error, but he added, both are often the recipients of miserable advice.

The alternative Old Testament lesson for this morning is from the prophet Amos, who almost 2800 years ago left us that great divine invocation “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteous like an everflowing stream.” Amos, as all of the prophets were, was concerned with the fate of the poor, the sick, the widowed and orphaned, the marginalized of society, as Jesus was 750 years later. Let justice roll down like waters, and righteous like an everflowing stream. I can hear Martin Luther King Jr. reading those words today, as I heard then 45 years ago in Washington. Jesus knew Amos’ teaching, in fact he quoted more from Hosea and Amos than from the other prophets.

When they are done with the five non-negotiables, do the folks who put out the Voters Guide at the Vatican perhaps echo more of Amos, or of Jesus? Let’s see. Their first two fully negotiable issues are war and the death penalty. No mention of the fact that Jesus saved the life of an adulterous woman by calling a

halt to her execution and publicly forgiving her. That upset the white collar establishment 2000 years ago as it would now. Yet we are told that is a negotiable issue, unlike say human cloning or gay marriage, neither of which Jesus ever mentioned, or likely thought of.

The pollution of the environment, food and water needs, human trafficking, health care, education, none of these made the non-negotiable list. Please. How can you possibly justify putting the value judgment and teaching of Christ aside in favor of a Vatican agenda that teaches that anyone who disagrees with Rome on any of the five non-negotiables is not welcome at the altar, but that how we feel about the poor and downtrodden of society is of lesser import, never mind Jesus' teachings. What are we to make of a mindset more occupied with discarded embryonic stem cells than with the needs of sick children?

The Church of Rome is hardly alone. In our own branch of the faith, has anyone read of a parish in Texas or Florida, or a diocese in California or Pennsylvania, leaving the Episcopal Church because they believe we pay insufficient attention to the poor, to sick children, to issues of war and peace, to environmental stewardship, and the like. Wouldn't that be refreshing? Happily we haven't been hit too hard here in the Diocese of North Carolina, but we have lost clergy, though not because of our position on what I like to think of as Jesus' economic/social agenda. No, the departures have been over two things, sex and

power, two things Jesus paid little attention to. I remember speaking to one former parishioner here at St. Luke's who told me he was no longer pledging, because of what he said were actions taken by the national church. I could not resist asking, "Is it because the Presiding Bishop isn't pushing war and peace issues enough, or maybe too much of the Clinton welfare reforms?" The question was not appreciated, but he did assure me his decision was based entirely on the consecration of the current bishop of New Hampshire. Well we sure know where Jesus stood on that issue, don't we? He just didn't mention it in any of his reported remarks in Scripture. Hey, I'm just your average garden variety Bible-believing Christian. Well, that sort of discussion, entertaining though it can be, really doesn't accomplish much. If I knew how to bridge that sort of divide, I would bottle it and sell it. The answer may be akin to what I heard someone say recently in the context of the national election, that "Skin color is as meaningful as eye color." And that eye color is chosen at the same time we decide whether to be gay or straight. Remember that day?

Now, we always have choices, as did the children of Israel, and Joshua, Moses' great expeditionary captain, was pretty blunt in the way he put it to them. Serve the pagan gods of old Mesopotamia or serve the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Put another way, to bring it forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, serve the agenda of Jesus that is concerned with the hungry, the poor, the incarcerated, victims of war and terrorism, families in Darfur, schoolchildren in Belize and here

in North Carolina, the sick, the helpless and hopeless, the dying and the lonely. Or, serve the narrow gods of greed, sexual tension and animosity, and the weapons of power. Which will it be? Which agenda will win out? The unconditional love of Christ will, I am persuaded, absolutely triumph. There may be temporary temporal setbacks. Pittsburgh may well move to Argentina, thankfully without the Pirates, but the overwhelming unconditional love and grace of Christ, aimed as always at the least of these our brothers and sisters will always win out. And all these other issues will pass away, thanks be to God.

This parish church, this diocese, this part of Christ's one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church has made its choice. As for us, we will serve the Lord. And, we will be prepared, as the five wise bridesmaids were.

Amen.

St. Luke's

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