

Sun. Oct. 30, 2004

Being A Citizen: Beyond Winning and Losing

Isaiah 40: 28-31; Luke 18: 1-8

A friend sent me an e-mail that a pastor had sent to his parishioners. The e-mail said that as a pastor, he would not tell his parishioners how to vote, but he wanted them to read a letter written by Rick Warren. The Rev. Rick Warren is the best-selling author of the books *The Purpose Drive Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*.

Rick Warren's letter, which is apparently being e-mailed by sympathetic pastors to the membership lists of thousands of churches across the United States, says that this is the most important election for the next 40 years, because whoever is elected November 4<sup>th</sup> could well have the opportunity to name four judges to the Supreme Court. The letter urges Christians to vote and says the two candidates have very different viewpoints on five issues about which, according to Rick Warren, the Bible is clear: abortion, stem cell harvesting, homosexual marriage, cloning, and euthanasia.

By the end of the letter, no one could have any question which candidate Rick Warren believes is on the side of the Bible and which one is not.

The person who sent me a copy of this e-mail, asked me this question: What are churches like yours doing about this election?

Let me express a couple feelings and thoughts this question raises in me:

First, Rick Warren, as a citizen, has the right to express his convictions about this election. He certainly has just as much right to express himself as Bruce Springsteen and the Dixie Chicks do.

Yet, having said this, I find myself really, really irritated by Rick Warren's letter.

I like Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Church*. It is an excellent description of how to organize a church to reach out to the unchurched.

But in his letter he says that a particular stance on the five issues he has decided to focus on is "not debatable" because, according to him, the Bible is "non-negotiable" on these issues.

I have read the Bible through a number of times, and I need to say I missed the chapters on stems cells and cloning. For that matter, the Bible has nothing much to say directly and explicitly about abortion or homosexual marriage or the complex issues surrounding choices about death.

Rick Warren's certainty that he knows God's wishes about these very complex and difficult issues bothers me. To think you personally know exactly what God believes about these things seems to me something very close to idolatry. To presume to tell people how they as Christians ought to vote because you know what God thinks seems to me something very close to blasphemy.

There was a time a lot of people thought the Bible was non-negotiable on the separation of the races. There was a time a lot of people thought the Bible was non-negotiable on supporting the institution of slavery. There was a time a lot of people thought the Bible was non-negotiable on the divine right of kings, and on "miscegenation" (inter-racial marriage) being a sin, and on the unacceptability of divorced people remarrying, and on the impossibility of the ordination of women or women even speaking in church.

When we study Scripture, the question we need to ask is what is the story line, what is God up to in human history? What are the commitments and values that emerge over the scope of the story? It looks to me like the story line is this:

Creation is good, including human beings, although we end up not treating each other justly or lovingly. We oppress each other. God moves in human history to liberate the oppressed and to care for the widow, the orphan, and the weak. God's love for us is so great that God finally become vulnerable to us in Jesus Christ in order to teach us how to become vulnerable to one another and to love one another, and to live together in community justly.

What would seem to me to be non-negotiable in Scripture are justice, mercy, beauty, truth and love.

But you study Scripture for yourself. We Methodists say that our faith should be shaped by Scripture, experience, reason and tradition, the Wesley quadrilateral. Each of us, in loving dialogue with one another, needs to discern our understanding of what it means to be faithful to the biblical story in which we stand and of which we are writing our chapter in our time and place.

The question my friend who sent me this e-mail asked was: What are churches like yours doing about this election?

Well, I hope we vote. I think voting is a responsibility for all of us who have this privilege.

But I would not presume to tell you how to vote, none the less how God wants you to vote. I hope your deepest values are shaped by your faith. I hope you take your deepest values with you into the ballot box. I hope your vote is an expression of your deepest values. But I do not think I can tell you how God wants you to vote.

Several weeks ago I was interviewed by a reporter who asked me whether I thought it was ever appropriate for a pastor to endorse a candidate from the pulpit. I told him I would not say “never” but that I would find it difficult to imagine a circumstance in which I would do so. I said: “My congregation does not need me to tell them how to vote. In fact,” I said, “my congregation could probably tell me how to vote.” What we need to do in church,” I said, “is to try to understand the meaning of justice and righteousness, love and compassion for our lives, and the issues and concerns we face in our time.”

So the question I was asked was: In the face of Rick Warren telling people how God wants them to vote in this election, what are churches like ours doing? My answer is I hope that we are not fighting fire with fire. I hope we are developing mature, biblically literate people with strong commitments and values, active in the parties of their choice, who do not need to be told how to vote.

What I hope churches like Foundry to do about this election is to emulate the widow Jesus talks about in Luke 18.

I love this widow.

She has been a parishioner in every church I have served during all my years in ministry. The pastor may not have been a very good pastor, not as attentive and as responsive as he should have been, but she kept after him, knocking on his office door, calling his phone, until she got him to do what needed to be done.

I love her.

I understand elections are important and who holds the office of president can make a big difference, but I believe the real heroes are people like the widow of Luke 18.

It did not matter whether that the judge was a bad or a good judge. She just kept bothering him until he acted justly, not because he was committed to justice, but because he knew she would not leave him alone until he did what was right.

The widow of Luke 18 was the heroine of democracy before democracy was tried.

We know that by the time this election is decided, about half of our nation's voters will have won and the other half have lost.

But I want to suggest that whoever wins, the real heroes will be those people who insist on justice and right, no matter who the president is.

It is my contention that justice happens not because a president makes it happen, but because people like the widow of Luke 18 pound away at it day in and day out. No president is a substitute for that kind of commitment, and no president can ignore it forever.

Justice-making is like prayer. The moral of Jesus parable is that we should be persistent in prayer. If the

widow of Luke 18 was able to get justice from a bad judge, how much more likely will we, if we pray persistently, get justice from a good God?

A lot of people have taken credit for the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Here is how I understand it happened. It started in the early 80s, years before the wall came down in the St. Nicholas Church of Leipzig, East Germany.<sup>1</sup> A small group of people at St. Nicholas started a Monday evening prayer service for peace. It started quite small. It began to grow. Then people would drift away and the group would become small again. But they continued to gather to pray for peace Monday after Monday.

In 1988 and 89 attendance sky rocketed. Attendance grew so high that East German officials began to worry. They posted roadblocks and detained people to try to prevent them from going to those services.

Finally, on October 8, 1989, the secret police were prepared to shoot and kill in order to stop people from assembling for that prayer service. That night the church was packed with more than 2,000 people, and another 70,000 were on the streets outside.

The crowds left the church and they began to march toward the City Hall, where the armed guards were waiting for them. The troops never opened fire. They retreated inside City Hall and they watched as the marchers placed their candles on the steps of the City Hall and stood there in a silent vigil for peace. According to Andrew Wolf, the commander of those troops stared out the window at that crowd and he was heard to mutter: "We planned for everything, we prepared for everything, except for candles and prayers."

Within a month, history shifted and the wall came down.<sup>2</sup>

Vote this Tuesday. But if your candidate wins, do not suppose the struggle for justice has been won. If your candidate loses, do not suppose the struggle for justice has been lost. Justice comes from the persistence and prayers of the widow of Luke 18, and from all of us who choose to follow in her way.

1 See the Website <http://www.stpetersmusic.btinternet.co.uk/stpnicholas.htm>

2 Andrew Wolfe, “The Power of Prayer” at [http://www.trinity-umc.org/sermons/June\\_15\\_03.pdf](http://www.trinity-umc.org/sermons/June_15_03.pdf).