

18th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

18 September 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Genesis 4:3-9

John 18:33-36

What would you do to get ahead? Maybe fudge a couple of details on your resume? Like did you know I was voted “Presbyterian of the Century” in 1999? The committee that was responsible for that has since been disbanded so you won’t be able to check up on that, but just trust me.

Would you turn in a paper you wrote for one class as original work for another class? Or copy your sermon for Sunday from the Internet one week because you got

busy? Would you make up an emergency to cut in line at the grocery store when you really just wanted to get home before *American Idol* started?

Most of us, at some point in our lives, have probably bent the rules a little bit, taken a shortcut here or there, done something that falls in that ethically gray area. Not that I have ever done anything like that in my life, but hypothetically speaking, if I had, I would justify it by convincing myself that other people were doing the same

thing, or that an occasional shortcut wasn't so bad if it was saved for special occasions, or that this was the season finale of *American Idol*, so that really does qualify as a legitimate "emergency."

I imagine at some evolutionary level, the drive to get ahead is part of our survival instinct, and on occasion that drive overtakes our better judgment.

Take our first reading this morning as an example. Cain and Abel are brothers, both working the land, tending crops or livestock, making their requisite offerings. And it takes only four chapters into the Bible before conflict hits. Abel, for whatever reason, seemed to be inching ahead of his

brother in the eyes of God. Cain in turn decided that the way for him to get ahead was to remove his competition from the picture.

But the real heart of the story comes after Abel's death at the hands of his brother. The heart of the story is the exchange between Cain and God that sets up one of the important themes that resonates throughout the rest of scripture. God asks Cain, "where is your brother, Abel?" And Cain responds, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

God does not answer Cain's question directly, but there is no doubt as to what God's answer is. "Of course you are your brother's guardian." Ever since chapter 1 of book 1 of the Bible, when God

says “let us make humankind in our image,” it is clear that God created humankind for community, for us to take care of one another, and not just ourselves.

I promised a sermon on politics today, and here it is. This is God’s politics. “Politics” comes from the Greek word πολιτικός from the root *polis*, meaning ‘city’. The word “politics” literally means how we relate to one another in community. And God’s politics are that caring for one another takes precedence over doing whatever is necessary to advance ourselves in this world.

Now I know that not everyone who has listened to me preach here over the past 11 years agrees, but I have

tried very hard not to bring politics into my sermons. Because I know that at least one person in here this morning will probably vote for Donald Trump in November, and at least one other person will probably vote for Hillary Clinton. We might even have someone who plans to vote for Jill Stein or Gary Johnson. I’m personally fond of the t-shirt I saw someone wearing recently that read, “I’m voting for pizza.”

But as you surely know, the Bible does not tell us how to vote. But that is not the same thing as saying the Bible isn’t political. Because it most certainly is. The Bible is the most politically charged book I know of, because it is about how we should live

together in this world.
And that is politics.

When Jesus says to Pilate that Jesus' kingdom "is not from this world" he isn't saying that his kingdom is elsewhere so Pilate and Caesar can have this world. He is saying that the ways of this world are not the ways of God, and that Jesus came to do something about that. Make no mistake, those are political words Jesus is saying. He is saying that Pilate is a bad leader.

Years and years ago, and some of you remember this time, before people gathered and lived in communities, our ancestors were nomads. People didn't live next to other people. Before agriculture, people were

hunters and gatherers. And it was best not to live around other people with that.

But then folks started to farm. And the agricultural revolution happened. And people started to live in communities, largely because of agriculture. And this meant a couple of things. First off, it meant folks needed to make rules on how to live as a society. As we might expect, some of those rules served to benefit the rule-makers at the expense of other people.

And that's when we pick up the first stories of the Bible.

Abraham is a wandering nomad as the story of his family begins in Genesis. By the end of the story his great

grandson Joseph is in Egypt with power enough to save a nation.

However, as soon as we turn the page, all of Joseph's, and Abraham's, descendants are enslaved in a foreign land.

Politics and power can work for you, or against you. Especially when you create and enforce and use the politics of violence and power.

In the Old Testament, when Israel is oppressed, as in Exodus, then God is on their side, liberating them from the political system that is literally killing them. When the powerful are abusing the Israelites, God hears their groans, and saves them. Because they are being oppressed.

But in that same Old Testament, when *Israel*

is in power, and is oppressing people, either its own people or other nations, then God is not on Israel's side. And God works against Israel to liberate people from an oppressive system. When the Israelites are the powerful who are abusing others, God hears the groans of the others, and saves THEM. Because they are being oppressed.

In the New Testament, Jesus and the early disciples lived under arguably the most powerful political system of the ancient world. The Empire of Rome. Claims of Jesus being Lord stood in direct opposition to the claims of Herod being Lord, or of Pilate being Lord, or of Caesar being Lord.

And I would ask you to quickly remember that Jesus was not trying to take over with a military coup. Even when he was pushed to do so, he wouldn't.

When Jesus says, "My kingdom doesn't originate from this world," he is pointing to the way things are, with death and unfair practices and huge disparities between the haves and the have nots, and saying, "This is the world that Caesar and Herod and you, Pilate, have built, and have maintained so that your interests are served." Jesus is saying that his way is a different way.

His way is where 5,000 people come

hungry, and yet everyone, not just the wealthy and powerful, get enough to eat.

Because the Old Testament and the New Testament were each written in a particular time and setting in this world, amid community, they deal with politics.

"Taking the Bible seriously means taking politics seriously. The major voices in the Bible from beginning to end are passionate advocates of a different kind of world here on earth, and here and now."¹

When we talk about the Bible and politics, I am immediately put on edge whenever I hear someone say something like "this is what God

¹ Borg, Marcus J *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most*. 129.

wants, or this is the Christian person to vote for." I agree with Jim Wallis who wrote years ago that "God is not a Republican or a Democrat." Neither Republicans nor Democrats nor Libertarians nor Green Party nor Tea Party nor Kermit the Frog Party, none of them can rightly claim that God is always with them.

But saying that how we treat each other, and how we organize our rules of how we treat each other, God has always been very interested in that, and clearly very much wants us to continue to grow as we move toward better ways of doing that.

Politics matters. It is about how we structure society, and a large part

of that is that sometimes people get oppressed. It has happened throughout all time since people started to live in communities, and it is well reflected in the Bible. Politics is about who rules, and who benefits from the rules. Is the economic system fair, or skewed to one segment of the populous? Are the laws fair? Or are they hierarchical, patriarchal, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, or unjust to any group of people?

For Christians, these questions matter. To abandon politics would mean leaving the structuring of society to people who would only serve their own interest. It would mean letting Pharaoh and Herod and Pilate and Caesar put the

world together as they will.

Does it matter how we vote? Yes. But you can vote Republican or Democrat or anything, even that Kermit the Frog Party, when the people and platforms you are voting for serve God's interests. No one party has ever had, nor ever will have, a corner on the market for following God.

But politics includes more than how we vote. It includes what we support in our conversations, that we don't support talk that would put down another one of God's creatures and children. Politics also includes what we do with our money, and what we do with our actions.

"We aren't all called to run for office or be activists. But we are called to take seriously God's dream for a more just and nonviolent world."²

So, go be political in whatever way you can, because it means being your brother's and your sister's keeper, and finding ways to bring the Kingdom Jesus talked about to here.

So be it. Amen.

² Borg, 130.