



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

THE TWENTY-FIRST
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST

OCTOBER 13, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

If we were listening to the Gospel according to Mark this morning, we might have started to squirm, fearful that what was to come was a sermon about ... money. What did Jesus say to that dear very righteous soul who just wanted to inherit eternal life:

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.¹

Those of us with many possessions typically start shifting uncomfortably, tuning out the sermon, or trying to think of an excuse to get up and leave. Or if we are preaching ... change the subject. So let us turn to something less controversial, but still topical. Next month's presidential election... and how we should vote.

Now before anyone is tempted to tune out, walk out, or call the IRS, let me emphasize that “how to vote” does not mean “who to vote for.” That would be out-of-bounds given our status as a non-profit religious organization.² Or we might be tempted to raise the separation of church and state that is well-established in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Some may take that as an excuse to insulate our political views from our religious beliefs and moral teachings. We all know that would be too easy.

We are, after all, a nation, a democratic republic, that has established a government in which power is vested in the people and exercised directly or through elected representatives. Or as stated by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address, government “of the people, by the people, for the people.”³

¹ Mark 10:21-22 (NRSV).

² 26 U.S.C. 501(c)(3).

³ Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863,

<https://www.owleyes.org/text/gettysburg-address/read/text-of-lincolns-speech#root-4> (accessed October 8, 2024).

And we are the people. The government and its laws and their application, interpretation, and execution is us. And we will be no less accountable to our creator for the actions of our government than the man who walked away from Jesus grieving that his possessions were an obstacle in his quest for eternal life.

And let's acknowledge that no one needs to take on more anxiety about this upcoming election. The cultural, religious, and political divide in our country, even around the world, runs deep. And we are challenged by a media environment that enables us to insulate ourselves from any news or information we disagree with. And immerse ourselves in whatever reinforces our preferences and prejudices. We feed the beast and feed at the trough of misinformation, disinformation, disarray, and demonization of those with opposing views. And we fail to understand that anyone who disagrees with us has even an ounce of goodness or good sense. So, sadly, but inevitably, we become anxious, even fearful about the outcome. Whatever our personal perspective or politics may be.

But then that is what this is about. How we vote is governed by who we are...and, moreover, who we should not be, when we cast our votes.

Let us ask who we are and what informs our decisions in the voting booth. Our self-interest? Our greed and economic well-being? Today's Gospel exposes the folly and futility of greed. The choice is between our wealth and possessions and nothing less than treasures in heaven and eternal life.

What about our fears and desire for security? How many times in the Bible do angels appear and what are the first words out of their mouths? Do not be afraid. Yet, fear can so easily get the better of us.

We all have heard of President Franklin Roosevelt's warning that, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."⁴ But we never hear the rest of the sentence, and it says so much:

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes efforts to convert retreat to advance.⁵

⁴ National Archives, "FDR's First Inaugural Address Declaring War on the Great Depression," <https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/fdr-inaugural/images/address-1.gif> (accessed July 11, 2024).

⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Inaugural Address of the President*, March 4, 1933, <https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/fdr-inaugural/images/address-1.gif> (accessed October 8, 2024).

And there's that wonderful line from the motion picture *Strictly Ballroom*:

Vivir con miedo, as como vivir a medias! (A life lived in fear is a life half lived.)⁶

We are not called to live half a life. Jesus never said take up your cross and follow me halfway up the hill to Calvary.

Pope Francis – who sounds more like an Episcopalian every day – also has reminded us of the consequences of letting fear take hold of us:

Because fear – as well as being a good deal for the merchants of arms and death – weakens and destabilizes us, destroys our psychological and spiritual defenses, numbs us to the suffering of others.... In the end, it makes us cruel."⁷

But even many arguably good things really have no place in our electoral deliberations:

Our political party. Our ideology. Our race. Our ethnicity. Our heritage. Our theology. Our religion. Our denomination.

Even that.

When we walk into the voting booth, we are no longer Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, Evangelical, non-denominational, or even Episcopalian.

We are no longer orthodox, liberal, or heretic, non-conformist, avant-garde, traditional, or radical.

We are no longer rich or poor, educated or uneducated, landed gentry or immigrant, privileged and powerful, up and coming or down and out.

We are no longer, conservatives, liberals, progressives, socialists, libertarians, or anarchists.

We are no longer Democrats or Republicans, Green, No Labels, Socialist Worker, or Transhumanist (which has nothing to do with gender identity, by the way).

⁶ *Strictly Ballroom*, IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105488/> (accessed October 8, 2024).

⁷Michael J. O'Loughlin, "Day Before the U.S. Election, Pope Francis Warns Against the Politics of Fear," *America, the Jesuit Review*, November 6, 2016, <http://www.americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/days-us-election-pope-francis-warns-against-politics-fear> (accessed October 8, 2024).

We are no longer white, black, brown, red, or yellow.

Because before anything else, we are children of God and, for us, in particular, followers of Christ.

We claim to be a nation “under God.” We even emblazon our currency and license tags with “in God We Trust.” So let’s ask, “If our trust in God cannot speak to how we vote, what can?” If the life and death and resurrection and mission and teachings of Jesus Christ don’t accompany us into the voting booth, what does?

So let us walk into the voting booth with Jesus at our side.

Let us embrace that we are accountable as citizens of a great nation and children of the one true God.

Let us recall that we are emissaries of a God of love, peace, justice, mercy, and compassion.

Let us acknowledge our promises to God at Baptism to “strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.”

Let us honor our promise to God to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Are we not, indeed, part of the body of Christ, all connected, and all dependent one on another, or as Paul wrote, “subject to one another.”⁸

Have we forgotten that we are called as followers of Christ to be hopeful, not fearful. We are called to embrace truth, not falsehood. We are called to be one in Christ, not divisive.

So as we take up the pencil to mark our ballot, let us look Jesus in the eye and vote for the realization of the Kingdom he proclaimed, the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Let us realize that by loving God first, we love our country more. Otherwise, we vote vainly for things that will pass away. And we deny our nation the light of Christ and the hope for a better day.

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⁸ Ephesians 5:21 (NRSV).