

Vocation in 2023

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The juxtaposition of this week's election in Georgia and the occasion of reading from our Scriptures Sunday after Sunday prompts me take us on a journey for a 30,000-foot view of a part of our scripture tradition that sometimes gets overlooked. Have you noticed how many books in the Bible are very deliberate about giving us the political context of the writer, of the story. We are told, very deliberately, who the ruler was, for example. Yes, we think of the Bible as a book about God's activity, but it is so often it is God's activity in interaction with one kind of political reality or another.

For example, the political context of Jesus' entire life and ministry is the context of Roman occupation, exploitation and violence. His message must be understood, in part, as a response to that context. Given Rome's agenda, it's not surprising that many Christian communities met secretly and thought of their future through the lens of small communities avoiding the glance of political power. They were not thinking about running for office.

The primary point is that in the life of faith, politics matters.

As I look at the best of Christianity's two thousand plus year span, I see a religious tradition trying to make sense of how to respond faithfully to the world around us. For example, the beginning of what Catholics call Catholic social teaching with the publication of the first papal social encyclical in 1891 entitled *Rerum Novarum* was prompted by a brand-new reality, the beginning of the industrial revolution. Realities emerged that had never been issues before: safety in the workplace, the treatment of workers in factories, including children, and issues like how much should a worker be paid, and how long should a worker be forced to work in a shift, and how should government be involved, and much more. These were not issues at the time of Jesus.

More recently, and in my lifetime, what was once described as the six themes of Catholic Social teaching became the seven themes of Catholic social teaching. And what was the addition? Care for creation. Yes, it became clear in the second half of the 20th century that a faithful commitment to love and justice required of us to take on the mantle of environmentalism and now climate change and environmental justice. These were not issues at the time of Jesus.

If you will allow me to look at 2022 in the United States of America after the Georgia election through the lens of the Gospel, the lens of love and justice and mercy and solidarity, I would like to speculate on a possible path forward for our faith communities, a new emphasis of faith and vocation, in light of what has become increasingly obvious in our time, and was not an approachable issue at the time of Jesus.

I think it's clear to all of us that the path to peace and justice can and should be sown by churches, but it necessarily runs through city hall, through the legislature, through the structures of governance. And here's the thing; the fact that justice is necessarily connected to politics is not a problem. When we say "Church," who are we talking about? We're talking about us. And we say "Government," who are we talking about? We're talking about us. We are the hope we are waiting for. We are the Body of Christ.

What is the vocation of the Christian in 2023, in light of our reality (which, remember, was not the reality of Jesus)? And I'd like to offer this: let's think of a revolution of politics, not a political revolution where one side overwhelms the other. No, I mean, let people of faith revolutionize politics. Let us

change the way we use language, speak of vision, respect opponents, eschew violent rhetoric, insist on honesty and truth, and set a course forward. And this can happen when we understand political engagement as a constitutive—not optional—dimension of our faith. Part of our vocation as a people of faith in 2023 is to recognize the enormous potential for good in the work of social policy and political process, and that we—as many of us as possible—get engaged as school board members, city council members, judges, representatives, senators, and political volunteers in the same way we have volunteered for decades for a thousand nonprofits.

Politics—or at least democracy—is fragile. I agree with Parker Palmer that, despite its fragility, democracy is the best version of politics we know of. It is a bit messy, always imperfect, and vulnerable to the quality of its representatives.

Here's the call to action: let the Church of love and justice and mercy and solidarity educate ourselves in politics in the same way we have educated our people about the bible or sacraments. Let us draft and commission and prepare people from our pews to run for political office and for each of us to find our way to campaigning, grassroots organizing, political education and engagement in a hundred ways.

This I know: if you want to address hunger, you can get up in the morning and make a dozen sandwiches and give them out under the bridge. But you'll be a LOT more impactful by working to pass laws that speak to job creation, access to healthcare, education and nutrition, and so on. I don't mean to suggest that we abandon the work of charity and emergency assistance, only that we complement that work with getting to the systemic causes of the problems and change the structures that cause or perpetuate the problem.

I ask you: does God want to heal, transform, and make whole you and me? *Yes, indeed.*

Does God want to heal, transform, and make whole our families and neighborhoods? *Yes, of course.*

Does God want to heal, transform, and make whole our churches? *Yes, to be sure.*

Does God want to heal, transform, and make whole politics? Is there anything on earth that God does not want to heal, transform, and make whole? *And so why not politics?*

Our vocation, our calling, is, together, to form and fashion ourselves and each other for the work of making new the face of the earth. This year, like every year before it, is a new time for a new possibility, a new way to be faithful, a new way for love to express itself in God's creation. New wine for new wineskins.