[IN PURSUIT OF TRUTH:
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS
IN THE 21ST CENTURY]

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In Pursuit of Truth: Political Engagements in the 21st Century

One of the things I miss most in national political debates is genuine expression of realism and idealism, sound pragmatism and bold optimism. I miss being stimulated and challenged to rethink solutions to our national and global problems. I love to tackle bold initiatives and work to find accommodations that allow divergent voices to join ranks and move the public interest forward. Such work is holy work. It cannot be done well without dependence on God for wisdom and strength.

Virtue is a critical factor in the bonding of those who would dare to pull back the curtains of cynicism and mindless party sound bites and who refuses to give-in to purveyors of skepticism and herals of pessimism. I believe in the optimism inherent in the democratic process. Through the pursuit of truth, individuals will find the inner strength to increase their intellectual awareness and expand the boundaries of their fellowship. I believe that engagements (volunteerism, civic participation on non-profit boards, community forum, and political activism) are the primary vehicles God uses to advance His kingdom and create transformed communities. The faith community is a viable and ideal venue for the facilitation of such engagements. Political and social interactive communities, however, are no less centers of divine activity. God was at work in Athens, the center of intellectual life as well as Jerusalem -- the center of worship; both were centers of renewal and reform.

These are the ideas this paper will explore. Our exploration will show that the pursuit of truth through political engagement is not a cakewalk; it is a demanding, painful costly and complicated venture.

I have asked myself, “Where is the sound of music in our culture?” Tuning in to any media outlet requires preparation for a cacophony of negative narratives. I can remember returning home from the inauguration of Mr. Obama celebrating a significant step taken by our nation to move away from the darkness of her past. A fellow traveler requested permission to turn the radio to a particular station just to see how the election of the first African-American was playing in hinterland. I was saddened but not surprise to discover that for that particular commentator, movement had occurred, but not in the direction I had hoped. His opening words had a searing effect upon my spirit: “I hope he [the President] fails.” Of course, his supporters indicated that those remarks were directed at the “policies” of the President.

Party loyalist would affirm what that commentator said. It became clear to me that amid change, much work was needed (1) to incorporate more and more people into the “beloved community” where ageism, sexism, racism, classism and nationalism are transformed by the power of truth and (2) to equip said persons to become reconciling influences in the world.
Can the Church of Jesus Christ rise to the occasion and once again initiate meaningful engagement with the world? Can the Church lead the way in equipping individuals to bow only to truth and support learning and service ventures, as vehicles most likely to bring about transformed relationships? Can the Church overcome her tendency to withdraw into silence in the face of organized efforts to polarize and neutralize her voice by insisting on a schism between sacred and secular? Permit me to take a “side bar” and reflect upon one consistent remark made by the late Senator Edward Kennedy. I did not always agree with all of his conclusions and the strategies he suggested for achieving them. But there was never a doubt in my mind as to his sincerity and willingness to buck strong opposition in pursuit of what he believed.

In many of Senator Kennedy’s speeches, he would conclude with these words: “and the struggle goes on!” that is the operative word – “struggle!”

Struggle is a part of great achievements. It seems to be true that the greater the goal, the more winding the road. Great things are the consequence of patient persistence.

Nowhere is this truer than in the pursuit of truth and noble engagements - civic, religious, or political. All too often, as Jesus indicated, even a good endeavor fails to evoke a thoughtful and responsible response from people of faith (Luke 10:31-32). An obviously wounded, desperate, unconscious and wholly helpless victim of injustice does not cause religious leaders to make a radical alteration to their priorities. The priest and the Levite Jesus referenced were certainly not a prime examples of neighborly love. What is worst, they had no sense of the moral need for engagement. We are in a very real sense responsible, not for the predicament of others, but for the affirmation of their humanity. Sensitivity to the pain others bear is an essential component in effective engagement. Without the capacity to feel deeply and the willingness to respond appropriately, what good are words without works (James 2:14-20)? Truth requires one to give visibility to what is believed.

Visibility is what set Jesus apart from all others. Truth was not an isolated phenomenon, a sterile lofty idea void of any connection to the human drama. Truth is which accurately conveys the reality of God’s will and character. Jesus was the truth of God in every respect. The Apostle Paul found that truth expresses the central dogma of the faith: God was in Christ… (1 Corinthians 5:19)! Who is Jesus? He is God with us! The evidence presented in Scripture is overwhelming! Everywhere Jesus went He did things associated with God and God alone! His witness inspired and restored faith! Giving visibility to truth has the power to do just that – to renew faith and transform lives.

Unfortunately, engagements of all kind have long trended downward. It is one of the saddest realities of history. One of the lamentations of pastors is the difficulty of getting people involved in ministries within and beyond the walls of the Church. Political and non-profit leaders have expressed the same disappointment. Voter apathy is a fact of life in most Western nations. Disengagement is not the direction John the Baptist and Jesus were tending. Both leaders were strong advocates of bearing witness to the truth – everywhere! No arena of life was on their exclusion list. No issue was considered...

The pursuit of truth provides a moral compass to guide individuals away from acts which undermine the visibility of God and the trust of others.

Do Christians have a moral obligation to participate in the civic and political process? I will argue they do. Jesus’ reference to “salt and light” is an explicit reminder that connectivity to the world is a high priority. Will that participation result in immediate social and spiritual gains? Perhaps! No guarantees, however. What actions can Christians take that will hopefully result in a humanizing of the political process, the personal growth of participants and the implementation of incremental steps in the revitalization of institutional life at all levels (a change in institutional culture that results in an increased responsiveness to human needs)?

Those who are committed to the pursuit of truth would do well to consider the following:

**First, Political engagement is holy work.** Political engagement is as sacred as a Jesus’ healing ministry. To use one’s gifts even the gift of aggressive engagement in political discourse in the service of excellence and the pursuit of truth is a very good thing. Moses would always be grateful for his astute father-in-law. Jethro’s wise advice enlightened Moses and perhaps enabled him to work smarter (Exodus 18:14)! Esther was doing holy work by disregarding a royal law and appearing in the king’s presence uninvited (Esther 4:11, 16). Her intervention averted the evil intentions of one of the King’s emissaries to execute a misguided policy of ethnic cleansings. David realized the gravity of the situation created by Goliath’s challenge to fight a representative of the army of Israel (1 Samuel 17:26). He alone understood that the honor of God was at stake and he did the unthinkable – volunteered to vindicate that honor.

Engagement is imperative when the issues involve the honor of God (truth). Jesus was not less holy “cleansing the temple” than He was in delivering the “Sermon on the Mount.” Both acts represent varying forms of spiritual engagement – deliverance from moral blindness (Matthew 5:17) and ethical bondage (Matthew 21:12). Political engagement is an act of stewardship (Luke 19:13). There is no dimension of life that is excluded from God’s concern! God’s love for the “world” is sweeping in its scope and redemptive in its goal. Political engagement is one of the vehicles for achieving God’s design. It is a way of creating community and empowering that community to work together under the influence of a mutual regard for the public good to pursue and secure for all the blessings of God and constitutional rights. No vocation is full of more rewards than an enlightened participation in political engagement.

**Second, Political engagement shares a common struggle** – unattractiveness.
Researchers have long called attention to the fact that civil engagement is waning;
especially among young people [Google “Robert Putnam’s work titled “Bowling Alone”]. The trend lines, according to Putnam, have long pointed in the wrong direction – down. Causes for this are legion: voter apathy, dissatisfaction with the negative political climate, hypocrisy in the lives of politicians and civic leaders, intentional mis-education of voters, media hyperbole, pork barrel ing, political stonewalling, disregard for truth, and incivility. This is not an exhaustive list, nor should it be considered the most salient causes of disinterest in political engagement. Engagement offers communities an opportunity to recover social trust and establish strong social bonds which have the potential to create new community-wide social and spiritual templates for moving persons from rigidity to flexibility, from the narrowness of “I” to the broadness of “We.”

Colleges and universities are making a real effort to turn around interest in and commitment to political engagement. Service learning has become the buzzword in higher education. Some institutions have gone so far as to link a service-learning component to courses. Students benefit greatly from such “field-experiences.” It is important for the Church to recognize its obligation to foster experiences in which her members are increasingly making contact with the “field” and the “base.” Sitting out political engagement is not a viable option for followers of Christ. All followers are called to active participation in the leavening work of improving the human situation for all. This work may be unattractive, but political engagement for some will involve an irrepressible urge to serve. For others, it will involve a call that must not be silenced by turning a deaf ear. It is the call to give voice to the marginal and oppressed. Giving voice to their concerns is not attractive work and no one is exempt from giving attention to the needs of the poor and oppressed.

Third, Political engagement requires a continuous practice of humility. Most leaders worry about their legacy. The desire to stand tall in the eyes of history seems to be a common concern of leaders. Everyone wants to be on the right side of history.

Yet, the most common mistakes people made by those who seek to leverage their influences is this human tendency toward an exaggerated opinion of oneself. We tend to do what Jesus found so prevalent in His day – we tend to hold others to a standard they are unable to meet. He called this “hypocrisy.” It is also known as “self-righteousness” (Matthew 7:1-5)

Self-righteous is a very difficult pill to swallow. Confession is not easy to do. Spinning is what too many public servants do. Yet, “coming clean” is the best medicine public servants can take when mistakes are made. We must always remember the exhortation of Scripture: “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper” (Proverbs 28:13).

Public engagement does not immune a person from moral lapses. Great care and discernment is required to avoid immoral and unspiritual “land mines.” It is not accidental that again and again Christians are warned of unethical temptations, which attend any noble pursuit (Matthew 6:1ff; 16:6; Acts 20:28; 2 Timothy 2:23). Hinds feet on high places is not merely poetic language. It is a reminder of the necessity to maintain spiritual vigilance, moral sensitivity to appropriate boundaries, and the need to practice
accountability. Humility is the best protection against an inflated ego. No one is so important that something cannot go on without him or her. Yet, the care of one’s character is always an issue of greatest importance. Jesus made it abundantly clear that nothing is worth the lost of one’s soul! People who participate in the life of the community must be honest with others about matters of the heart.

Political engagement necessitates honesty. The same week a former governor was found unfaithful to his wife, a presidential candidate who was a prime leader in the prosecution of a former president, was defending his long record of infidelity. A news commentator was harsh in his criticism of the latter because he was guilty of doing the very thing he had vociferously condemned in another.

Judging others’ motives is always wrong. Everyone has the right to hold an opinion. Yet, engagement is by nature democratic. No one’s opinion is so exalted that it is beyond being wrong or un-improvable. Engagement is for the purpose of “iron sharpening iron.” Where there is give-and-take, everyone benefits. A wise man once said: “None are as smart as all of us together.” True! The greatest contribution will always come from dialogue in a blame-free atmosphere between those who are open, honest, willing to remain fixed on truth and the greatest good. For in the final analysis, a warning is in order: political engagement has a way of revealing the “under belly” of a person’s life, weaknesses and wrong-headedness. But there is hope.

**Fourth, Political engagement is enhanced through cultural exposure.** Cultural enrichment is one of the many benefits from political engagement. Participants in the political process find themselves listening to others, experiencing their pathos, learning about the social dynamics and personal struggles which were a part of others’ lives. This learning is part of the potential for personal growth. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, political engagement hold the wonderful opportunity for a richer life broader relationships and greater understanding of the social and economic impact of public policies.

It is impossible to truly know people apart from experiencing their culture. So much of the cacophonies of political and religious pronouncements come from living in cultural isolation. It can be assumed that Jesus’ denunciation of the “rich man” was due to his complete indifference to the plight of another (Luke 16:19-31). Here is a picture of one who is without excuse. His tenure in a culture of luxury had unfortunately blinded him to any human connection to the condition of another. He made no effort, not even the minimum effort to ease the pain of Lazarus. That is the potential danger of being rich – a loss of sensitivity or compassion for others. To their credit, many persons in possession of great wealth get involved in compassionate services because they believe in the connectivity of humankind. They refuse to allow their financial condition to isolate them from the call to serve, the call to participate in the betterment of society, the call to share in the empowerment of others. Humanity is at its best when persons are actively engaged in reaching across the cultural divide and finding ways to assist others through education, healthy care, economic development and spiritual formation. These are the hard and soft skills people would do well to nurture in order to realize their fullest potential.
Fifth, Political engagement requires courage. The purpose of political engagement is to give voice to the silent, invisible and helpless. Character is found in what we do for others. Jesus made it clear that the poor, the marginalized and disinherit are not outside of God’s care and concern. They are within the circumference of God’s love. In fact, their care is God’s litmus test for authentic servanthood. Equally true is the fact that truth is found not in lofty rhetoric, but in humble and selfless service. Courage – the will to act – is required for truth, equity and justice to prevail in the struggle against injustice.

Courage is often required to embrace the concerns and rights of the underrepresented. Power rarely confesses a mistake or does what David did: bear witness to his sins (2 Samuel 12:13ff). Truth makes its greatest inroad when it is place in the service of exalting Christ and opening doors of opportunity for others. It is precisely because wickedness has closed doors of opportunity for certain sectors of society—(redlined sections, gerrymander districts, unfairly distributed resources, enacted biased legislative measures) that good people are needed to stand in the gap and work for the fullest representation of justice. The forces of injustice are strong, sinister and unforgiving. Will they be allowed to remain uncontested? Can good people afford non-participation in the political process? Hardly! Power that is not used in the interest of justice is like a boomerang. It will do great harm to others and return to do great harm to the hand that launched it. Power is intoxicating and is oftentimes corrupting. Lord Acton declared as much when he penned those memorable words: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” History well documents this sobering truth: good people can and do gravitate to the lowest denominators when they drift from their pursuit of truth. The Church stands as a “mighty fortress.” Her Captain is God. Her mission is to “sow” His seeds and seek His face. Her message is simple: Jesus is Lord! Her charge is to serve this present age. Her reward is singular: an uninterrupted fellowship with God! Does the Church need more of an incentive to function as God’s “crier and herald of goodnews in the face of injustice and poverty? Transformative change is possible only when good people stand up and work to remedy the ills and remove the obstacles which consign people to a status lacking in resources, fairness, and respect for their inherent worth.

Sixth, Political engagement necessitates a healthy respect for people’s differences. Political engagement requires a healthy respect for differing views. Compromise is etched into the fabric of political and religious discourse. No one should ever be asked to compromise their conscience unless the content of that conscience is obviously ill informed or blatantly at odds with what is good for all! Everyone should be expected, however, to pursue a middle ground rather than settle for a stalemate on crucial matters.

Webster defines “compromise” as a “settlement of differences,” “mutual concessions.” Jesus urged His disciples to quickly find a resolution to issues between persons (Matthew 5:25). I have found in my twelve years of public service that issues look very different when you occupy a seat of authority. Rarely have issues remained “black and white.” Issues have a way of taking on the color of grey against the background of a fuller disclosure.
I quickly discovered that in most issues compromise is not a dirty word. Truth is seldom found to reside in extreme positions. It takes a great deal of maturity to remain in dialogue with others whose views come from a different set of assumptions, experiences and cultural preferences. Time is needed to sort through assumptions and construct rationales capable of moving persons to shared conviction. Finding such a place is “eureka moment.” Our country could use more such moments. Our cities and states could benefit from a new wind of respect filling the atmosphere of their legislative chambers. Our churches could become a dynamic seedbed of transformative agents by equipping persons to live joyfully in the world while holding firmly to those things that are “weightier,” and practicing civility toward those who differ.

Lastly, political engagement is an opportunity to recover one’s humanity. The twentieth century has seen the devastating effects of domestic violence and the human carnage of brother against brothers. War is no stranger to any part of the globe. No continent has been untouched by the cruelty of violence or the pangs of suffering. Yet, the lesson which comes from the luminous episodes of history remind us that inaction in the face of injustice is a sign of personal insensitivity and a lack of moral fiber.

What is at stake is humanity itself. Those who came before us can remind us that life comes not by protecting our own self-interest, but by advancing the interest of others. The way to recover a lost humanity is to engage in the work of helping others recover their dignity and respect as valued persons. Jesus did. It is written that He “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). He did “good” for whom? All who were considered unacceptable, untouchable, unwanted, immoral, and the least in society! Jesus understood the importance of doing justly, being merciful, and walking in humility. He did not compartmentalize His life. He fully embraced humanity in all of its weakness and wretchedness. He found a way to resist becoming less sensitive to the human condition. This is a challenge that will test the authenticity of the church in the twenty-first century. Can she join God in embracing the human condition and working to bring about a new order that is commensurate with love and laws of the land? Christians would do well to resist separating spiritual and social matters. As stated earlier, God is at work in the realm of the secular humanizing humanity, connecting people with the struggles and sufferings of others. Unjust laws must not be allowed to dehumanize people.

Engagement is the way to ensure that doesn’t happen. If the civil rights movement teaches us anything, it is this: behavior can be modified and altered by just laws. Good people will make behavior adjustments in light of the law. The influence of prejudices and biases will dissipate according to each person’s ability to embrace the ethic of God’s love. It happened to the Apostle Paul, and it was his conviction that the perfecting of love in the heart of persons would result in a new set of values, a new identity of who is my neighbor, and a new mission – to connect with a suffering humanity and offer to all the opportunity to know and honor the living God! This is the kind of change our world needs most – the change that comes through the application of God’s love to within the context of human suffering. This is the call of the Gospel; a call that involves “deep change.”
Followers of Christ can enhance the possibility of “deep change” by working to promote inclusive experiences, which allow persons an opportunity to discover the vastness of commonality shared between persons of differing background.

In conclusion, the world benefits from an active and enlightened citizenry. Progress is impossible without it. I have an unshakable faith in the power of individuals to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). In fact, no significant social and spiritual reform has occurred apart from persons collaborating in the advancement of some truth through political engagement. I have a strong belief that engaged persons can be found residing in every sector of the nation and notwithstanding the contrary traditions and tendencies of their fellow citizens, they are not afraid to challenge and push for better alignments with truth. I have an undying appreciation for those who worked unrewarded, sacrificed greatly for principles they believed to be sacred and true. The annals of history are full of such heroes. In the closing discourse concerning the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:35ff), names of the well known give way to the unknown. Their pursuit of truth never wavered. Nothing “weighty” was compromised. They went unheralded, but not unrewarded. Their reward was the cheers of history and the commendation of the Lord!

It cannot be stressed enough that the greatest benefit, which comes from political engagement, is personal enrichment. No one should ever discount the value and honor that comes from exploring a wide range of possibilities within a context of mutual respect. The goal of political engagement is not to make friends at all cost as much as it is to be friendly regardless of the cost. The relationship between sacred and secular may seem wide, but the more you plumb the depths of human issues or historical events, you are likely to discover the margin of difference between the two is invisible. Political issues are akin to matters of the heart! What persons are in private chambers will not change because they step into the public arena. Political realities are oftentimes an extension of heart matters and heart matters are invisible indicators of the world’s conditions.

People will always be subject to miscues and misrepresentation of their cherished values. But in the long run, the pursuit of truth will function as a rudder to guide good people to develop thoughtful, appropriate, and just public and spiritual policies

This is my hope. This is my prayer. Amen!

Appendix:

Link to Robert Putnam’s work: