

Facing A Stark Choice: Politics and Partisanship or Christ

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I think it's clear that our country faces a very stark choice. I'm not so sure that the clear choice is the one that everyone thinks that it is.

Rather, I think that the choice is this: Politics and partisanship or Christ.

On the one hand, we can choose to put our time and effort and attention into the political arena. Where does that lead? Setting aside platforms for a moment and just looking at behavior, it seems clear to me that whether you're of the right or the left, the behavior, the actual path, is much the same. Mockery, name calling, rejoicing in the suffering of others as long as they're wrong and you're right, excusing of bad behavior as long as it's from someone on your side, etc.

If you choose this path, there will be plenty of opportunity to feel good about your choice, at least on the surface. After all, everyone believes their ideology to be the compassionate and kind one and so when you attack and belittle others, you're doing it in the name of all that is just and right, aren't you? And there is no end to the sins and mistakes of the "other side" that you can point to that excuse all of your bad actions. "They did it first! You know them... if we don't do this, they will!"

Dostoevsky wisely noted about a century and a half ago how easy it is to love "humanity" so much in the abstract that we end up unable to stand the people right around us. We even end up hating our family members, friends, and neighbors, because they are wrong and we are right. We love "humanity" but dehumanize actual human beings. In the past few weeks, I have seen people rejoicing at the death of Justice Ginsberg and others rejoicing at the potential death of President Trump, all in the name of compassion.

This path is also, in some ways, an easy one. It doesn't require much action from us. For us to consider ourselves righteous, we have only to have the right opinion, and that is enough for us to have the right to look down on others. I literally read, not long ago someone writing about how she used to really admire her parents because they live simple lives, give a lot to those in need, open their home to the homeless, make meals for people going through difficult times and for the hungry, etc. However, she found out that they support some politician or other, and now she has practically disowned them unless and until they support the same politician that she does.

However, while this path might feel good on the surface, it comes at a heavy cost. It wears down our heart and souls. And while the pride of feeling that we're right and better might feel good on the surface, the division and hatred feel bitter on the inside. And while it might seem easy, it quickly feels exhausting. Who among us hasn't felt that exhausting bitterness?

The way of Christ is different. We can (and should) still care about what is good and true and right. We can still work towards it. But our approach will have to be different. We not only have to work towards justice, mercy, and compassion for those who are treated unfairly, but we have to do so in a way that is humble, kind, and merciful even to those who we see as the source of the problem. We have to help not

just those who are suffering unjustly, but even those who are suffering justly, knowing how often we, too, have received mercy.

We have to lay down some of the weapons we're used to using. We cannot belittle, name-call, or dehumanize. We cannot use the sins or bad actions of others to justify our own bad actions. We can no longer twist the words of our opponents to make them seem as bad as possible. Rather, we need to put the best possible construction on the words of those we disagree with. We need to hold our own side accountable but be merciful with the mistakes and moral scandals of others. We cannot rejoice in the sufferings of our "enemies," but rather wish them the best and take their sufferings on ourselves if possible.

We have to do away with pride, and work for the good, with God's help, in humility, always being willing to seek common ground with others, to hope, to believe, to forgive, and to pray. Humbling ourselves as Christ humbled Himself might sting at first, especially when we haven't learned to distinguish between our egos and ourselves, but we will soon find that forgetting our egos and actively seeking out the good in others leads to far more joy in the long term.

The way of Christ, the way of the Cross, might also seem like more work at first. We can no longer love others in theory only and praise ourselves for how compassionate our thoughts are. Rather, we must love others in deed. And while that doesn't preclude voting, it also means far, far more than that. Our beliefs and our actions should mirror each other. We should give of our time, our money, and our attention, not counting how much we are giving up, but forgetting quickly about any good that we do and always looking to do a little bit more.

The work of active love, however, will soon turn out not really to be work at all, or at least not the kind of work that we're used to. By God's grace, it will make us feel more rested and restored than any relaxation ever could. Will it always (or even often) be easy? No. But it is healing and restorative to our hearts.

We can no longer make our faith a subcategory of our politics and think that we are following Christ because we pull the right lever in a voting booth or have the right political philosophy. Christ must either be the prism through which we see everything in life, the One who turns our enemies into friends, or else nothing. It is clear that we cannot have a partial or subsidiary faith and think that we are Christians. We must have no party other than Christ, no words other than kindness and blessing, no goal other than Golgotha and the crucifixion of ourselves for the sake of the love that Christ commands us to show all people.

If we act like Christians, will that help "our side" win? Maybe or maybe not. It may very well end in our defeat or death. But we will have been faithful to the name of Christian that we were given in Holy Baptism.

As we approach the election (and really every day), remember to Whom we belong and Whom we serve. Let us carry our Crosses with dignity, patience, love, and joy, wanting nothing more than to be worthy of the name of Christian that we were given in Holy Baptism.

Forgive me.