

Nothing for Its Own Sake

February 25, 2007

“Politics without Principles”

Rev. Broadbent:

This week I learned that today, this Sunday, is known traditionally within the church as Quadragesima Sunday – the Sunday of the 40 days. Quadra, that’s the four, and then Gesima is the first to attend.

For the first seven centuries, Lent began on this day. It was not until the seventh century that four more days were added to actually make up the 40 days of Lent leading up to Easter. So now, along with churches throughout the world, this past Wednesday, we gathered in this space and put ashes on each other’s foreheads and said words like “Child of God,” “From the dust you have come and to the dust you shall return.”

We became aware of our mortality, our brokenness. We reminded one another that from a place of humility we may approach God in a non-self-assuming way and that we may find community in that realization of our vulnerability.

Forty. It is an important number within our faith. The days of Lent are 40 because as one of our young people pointed out, Jesus, himself, wandered in the desert for 40 days and for 40 nights. So we set aside this time for our own wandering. And those 40 days and 40 nights were based upon other 40s that you find in scripture. The 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness before finally laying their eyes upon the Promised Land. Many of them had already died. Others had been born, but they were the same people as when they had started out.

And before that, you will remember it rained for 40 days and 40 nights in the time of Noah. Quadragesima 40, the holiness of the number – 40. That is the length of the journey that we are on.

Another holy number is 7. Whenever Lent comes around I peak my eyes and ears for themes that might come in the number 7. When I received an issue of *Sojourners* magazine and opened it up, I saw a Gandhi poster, with the seven deadly social sins on it, I thought, ah-hah, here is a possible Lenten theme. So the worship counsel and I decided that it would be so.

Today, the deadly social sin articulated by Gandhi that I want to consider is the sin of politics without principles. As I considered this theme, I found myself thinking that politics had to do with somebody else. Somebody in some elected position of whom I could be very critical. I want to encourage you, as I encourage myself, to not just try to put that on somebody else. Not only are we invited to be voters, but we are also invited to be active participants in the political process. While we may be critical of mistakes that others have made,

Nothing For Its Own Sake
February 25, 2007

just count how many mistakes you made yesterday, count them, as well as you, amidst the same humanity.

Politics. I have mentioned before that the root of that word is the *politic* or the people. Politics has to do with how we govern, how we decide, how we organize, and how we are going to relate to each other, whether through national government or even church polity.

The other word in this sin articulated by Gandhi is principles. I had to look it up. It is one of those words where you hear it and you say, “Yeah, yeah.” Then you think, “What does that really mean? What really is a principle?” The most basic and straight forward definition I found was “a basic truth, law, or assumption.”

What would politics without principles mean, given that definition? I mean, that definition is quite neutral. What principles? Aren’t there conflicting principles? Does it matter what kinds of principles are attached to the politics? Absolutely. But just the phrase “politics without principles” does not tell us which principles we are to adopt. All we know is that what we are to confess is a politics that does not have any principles – politics bereft of any kind of basic truth, law, or assumption.

But the messiness is involved in how we negotiate as people – and maybe this really is the work of politics – which are those principles we are going to place at the center of our life together.

Perhaps the passage from Deuteronomy has something to tell us about which principles we may choose as those being instructive to our politics. As Janet mentioned, the context is that the people Israel are on the mountain looking down into the Promised Land. And as you might imagine, they want to throw everything off and just run into it. I mean, they have been waiting 40 years for this very moment, but they pause – for a moment, a few days, we do not know how long. Deuteronomy is that sermon, that presentation of laws and instructions that happens just before they go in and take the land.

Moses is there; and by tradition, it is Moses who is sharing the story of Deuteronomy. But keep in mind, the word “Deuteronomy” means a second telling, a second law. It is a reflection upon the law. It is a recap of what we might find elsewhere in the Torah. What we do know from modern scholarship is that Deuteronomy was composed not by Moses and not while the people of Israel were looking at the Promised Land. But years, decades, centuries later, in reflection, perhaps they wondered, “What if we had set down some different rules before we had just gone and taken that land?”

Nothing For Its Own Sake
February 25, 2007

The portion that Janet read has to do with the celebration of the Festival of First Fruits. It would have been about this time, maybe a little bit later in the year, the first springtime harvest, where the first bits of produce would have shown on the vine. You can imagine – they have waited all winter and have done without certain sorts of food and now, there they are, springing fresh and green on the vine or the stalk. You can also imagine that you would want to just go and eat it. Right then; right there.

But they had a practice. The practice was a recognition that all things come from God. “I would not even have this field if it were not for God. None of us would eat anything were it not provided by God’s self.” So the practice became that you would take the first fruits of your harvest and you would bring to the temple.

There are some interesting details in this passage. There is actually a conflict in the text. One is that you would bring your produce to the temple. I don’t know if you have heard it, but in one place it says that you give those first fruits to the priest, who then places them at the foot of the altar. But a little later it says, “You shall set it down before the Lord.” Here is the conflict in the text, probably of two different traditions. One is a very high priestly tradition where you give it to the priest. And another one, which was a more democratic tradition, is where you, yourself, would place it in front of the altar.

Also interesting in this passage is that the person bringing the offering gives a sort of confession, spoken not by the priest but by the person bringing the gift. The confession is “a wandering Araman [sp?] was my ancestor. He went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien [or a stranger or, in the translation Janet read, as a sojourner]. He was few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populace.” The wandering Araman [sp?] was Joseph, who went down into Egypt.

Deuteronomy is primarily a historical remembering, not only of the law but of the history of the people, a taking account, a taking stock of who we are as a people. How did we get where we are? Why is it that we have done what we have done and found ourselves where we are?

Heidi Neumark, in a recent article in the *Christian Century* has a wonderful description of the affect of this text. She writes, “The text from Deuteronomy tells of God’s migrant people on the verge of crossing into the land of promise. They are given a lengthy set of instructions to help them as they settle and build.”

The portion of text chosen for those of us on the edge of Lent comes with concern for a new danger in “the land of milk and honey.” The danger is that when the sojourners settle they will settle for something less than the vision

Nothing For Its Own Sake
February 25, 2007

and hope for liberation and justice that sent them forth in the first place. And it proved to be a valid concern.

Those who entered the land did eventually settle for their own well-being as a group, neglecting the full liberating command of Jubilee. They settled as possessors who overlooked the dispossessed and the disconnected.

As God's people, we are on the mountain and we are looking down into the Promised Land. But let us pause for just a moment to take some stock of our history of where we have been, of what we have learned. Perhaps we might draw a principle or two from that. Perhaps, before we are so quick to blame the outsider and the alien and the stranger among us, we might consider that we, too, and this is the affect of this text from Deuteronomy, which is "we" who are then about to enter in. It is "we" who are engaged with the responsibility of taking stock of what it is we are about to do. It is "we" who were oppressed. It is "we" who were freed from bondage. It was "we" who wandered in the wilderness. But we forget so quickly. And so let us just pause for a moment and consider that there are already people living in that land. That we are the strangers, as we enter. And that even as we start to get comfortable, we might notice that there are others who are the alien in our midst.

The way of Lent is the way to the cross. The best reading, I think, of the cross is that the one who was without blame died, that we should not scapegoat anyone any more. He who could not be scapegoated was, freely, a choice. And so we are caused to look at the ways in which we scapegoat each other.

Consider those upon whom we put all of the blame, whether it is the alien in our midst or even the politician, him or herself, who has made really bad decisions. "Oh, if I were in that position I would have decided a lot better." We scapegoat everyday. We try to explain away, and we try to come to grips with how we are by saying that somebody else put us here. It is so easy to confess someone else's sin, but not quite as easy to confess our own.

Mistakes have been made in this current administration. But mistakes were made in the previous one, and the one before that. How many mistakes did you make yourself yesterday? How do we determine which principles we are all to live by? We are to look back. We are to consider something of our history. We are to remember so that we will repeat the things that worked and so that, perhaps by God's grace, we will stop repeating those things that never work.

Preparing for Lent, I watched the movie *Gandhi*. That is a long movie. It is a good one. And I was very struck by the way the film portrayed some of Gandhi's words that are very familiar. I am sure this quote happens. You know he wrote it down somewhere, but in the movie, he shared a quote while he was

Nothing For Its Own Sake
February 25, 2007

lying in bed during his first hunger fast. You see all of his efforts and all of his preaching about non-violence has led to violent riots. His fellow supporters of India's nationalist movement say, "Well, let's just go with it. You know, it's already going. This train has already gone. Let's just follow it." And Gandhi says, "You know what, I need to take responsibility for this, and I'm going to fast until the rioting has finished." And this one man on this hunger fast stops the violent rioting, but only after many, many days. He is on the brink of death really, and there is a woman who has come from England to serve him. He whispers in a strained way these words to her, "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers; and for a time, they can seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Think of it. Always. Whenever you are in doubt that that is God's way, the way the world is meant to be, think of that, and then try to do it this way."

May our Lenten discipline be to remember that the way of truth and love has always won. To proclaim that this is God's way, the way the world is meant to be. To remember that and then to do it.

Amen.