

Open Your Basket Stewardship Series
Stewarding Our Citizenship
October 6, 2024
Scripture: Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God?

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

This week, every registered voter in the state of California will receive their voter ballots in the mail. That ballot represents one of our fundamental rights as citizens of the United States. The way we fill out that ballot reflects our values and the ideals that guide us. Our vote is an opportunity for us, as followers of the teachings of Jesus, to have a voice in the laws and in the selection of the lawmakers that govern us. It's a privilege that the first followers of Jesus did not have.

There is nothing wrong with patriotism. There is nothing wrong with having a genuine love for one's country, especially when we are holding onto the ideals of our nation, which include liberty and justice for all. Patriotism, however, is not blind. Patriots can acknowledge those places where we have fallen short of our own ideals and we can own the truth of our history, even when it is unjust and scandalous. We can use our voice and our vote to heal the wounds of the past and work toward the ideal of a nation of liberty and justice for all, and all means all.

Patriotism can devolve into idolatry when we place love of country over love of neighbor. Stephen Mattson, writing for Sojourners Magazine says, "If our love of country inspires us to hate or fear others, we are no longer engaging in anything holy or good."¹

Jesus taught that we are to seek first the Kingdom of God. No nation will ever be a perfect expression of the Kingdom of God. Even as we seek to be a more perfect union as a nation, we know that the Kingdom of God transcends national boundaries. It is a vision of peace, harmony, justice, and welcome for all people in all their differentness. It is a kingdom where everyone has enough, and all are regarded as created in the image

¹ Stephen Mattson, Sojourners, "The Idolatry of Loving Nation More Than Neighbors," October 25, 2021

of God. The Jesus taught that the practices of compassion, mercy, forgiveness, generosity, kindness, and nonviolence promote the kingdom of God. Jesus also taught that violence, hatred, tribalism, and greed are antithetical to the kingdom of God.

Our vote is just one thing in our basket of our citizenship. We have other ways, as citizens, to seek first the Kingdom of God.

The prophet Micah tells us that God requires us to “do justice.” As citizens we have the right to protest and resist injustice. We can learn our history and recognize how racial injustice has been deliberate, causing wealth gaps, criminalization, and demonization. We can use that knowledge to confront racism as it manifests today, along with all the other isms of our time. We call this social justice, and it is the work of loving one’s neighbor. Over and over again in scripture, we see God’s concern for vulnerable and mistreated populations, including widows, orphans, immigrants, and those suffering in poverty. Doing justice is the work of addressing the conditions that keep people marginalized and suffering. How we treat “the least of these” as a nation and as individuals is the measure of our faithfulness.

Another item in our basket of citizenship is freedom of speech, which our faith tells us to use wisely, for building up, not tearing down. We have the freedom to refuse to participate in the perpetuation of propaganda and misinformation that harms and misleads. Erica Lee, of Springfield, Ohio, had no idea what she was unleashing when she posted on Facebook. She said, “It just exploded into something I didn’t mean to happen.” It started when her neighbor, Kimberly Newton, told Erica Lee that she thought that a missing cat was the victim of an attack by her Haitian neighbors, which is something she heard from someone else. Erica Lee posted this exchange on Facebook. This story got mangled and confused with another story, from another city in Ohio, where someone killed and tried to eat a cat. This story exploded when it was announced in a public forum that Haitians in Springfield, OH are eating people’s cats and dogs. The fallout was swift and devastating. Two elementary schools were forced to close, 33 bomb threats we communicated to schools and public offices, the bureau of motor vehicles was forced to close, and an event planned to celebrate diversity, arts, and culture called “Culture Fest,” was canceled. The Haitian community was threatened. Meanwhile, the police department and city clerk both reported that no such incidences of pet abduction and consumption by Haitian people had ever been reported in Springfield. It all started with a seemingly innocent post.

As we live into the command to love our neighbor, we have a responsibility to fact check inflammatory statements and half-truths and recognize their potential harm to our neighbors.

As Christians we can also get involved with causes that educate, uplift, and promote health and justice, especially for the least of these. This includes the part we all play in the healing of our planet.

The final thing I want to address is anger. When people are angry, they look for someone to blame. Jobs that once sustained families have moved overseas. People are angry. Inflation, crime, homelessness, taxes, the cost of living, the ever-growing disparity between the rich and the poor stir up anger. Injustice stirs up anger. We want someone to blame. Anger itself is not bad or wrong, it can motivate us to act. But when we over-simplify complex problems and lay blame at the feet of one group of people, whom we then demonize and attempt to punish, it becomes a sin.

We like simple answers. We like simple solutions. Yet that is no excuse for not doing our homework and exploring the often more-complex realities, like globalization, that are impacting our lives. Anyone with a cell phone has more computing power in their hand than was used to land a man on the moon. Check multiple sources, engage in conversation, read opposing points of view, resist the temptation to lay the cause of your problems at the feet of your neighbor. Instead of laying blame, we can work together. We can do better. Our faith commands us to do better.

As Americans we have a basket full of rights and responsibilities. Our job as Christians is to exercise those rights and responsibilities according to the values Jesus taught and for the greatest good. In our basket we have the right to vote, the right to free speech, the right to a free press, the right to practice our religion. As Christians we have the responsibility to use those rights to seek first God's kingdom.

Everyone today has a "basket." I know it's a little cheesy but I want you to open your basket. If you are viewing online the printouts are attached to the online bulletin for today. In your basket you will find a California voters guide. Maybe you already know everything that is on it, but maybe someone you know doesn't. This guide explains voting in California and lists important deadlines. It is still not too late to register to vote. There is also a piece of paper with information about the resources provided by the League of Women Voters. Californians will be voting on ten ballot measures. The League provides non-partisan information, including pros and cons, for each ballot measure. Today we have a representative from the League who will help us better understand these ballot measures. It is important for us to understand the impact of these ballot measures. Our representative will be in the Fireside Room and we will begin at 11:30 with her presentation.

The last thing in your basket is a little card that says, "My Vote." Today, as we come forward for communion you are invited to prayerfully put your card in the ballot box as a symbol of your commitment to use this opportunity to serve God's kingdom. If you are unable to come forward you can place your card in the offering tray as it is brought to you, or if you online, you can type "My vote," in the chat box.

Our citizenship is something we steward. May we steward it in ways that serve God and love our neighbor.