

All Saints' Sunday, November 4th 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church.
Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Here we are again! Celebrating every baptized person who's gone before us - we're celebrating being a community united in baptism. That's why we renew our baptismal promises on this day. These promises are unique to us – at least in the sense that no other Christian denomination has anything quite like them; no other denomination renews the vows, re-accepts the promises, made at our baptisms in this way.

It might seem that what we're doing is uniquely Christian – and actually, some of it is. But not all of it. That last bit - about “respect[ing] the dignity of every human being” predates the Book of Common Prayer 1979. It was written down in a document in 1948 - in the preamble and in Articles 22 and 23 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The UN Declaration is a political declaration. “Political” is an interesting word, isn't it?! It comes from the Greek word “polis”, which means “city”. Even back in the 1st Century when that word was used, it meant more than literally a city with a wall around it. It had to do with the nature of human communication, the community; it was an inclusive ‘blanket’ word.

So this respect for dignity thing – it's political, right? Right! Political in the sense that it has to do with how civilizations structure and govern themselves. In the Empire, every polis had a mechanism for oversight and governance, and a forum where the things that were important to the Polis were discussed and decided. That mechanism was something that – in Greek – was called an “ekklesia.” If you wanted to be a legitimate and respectful part of the empire, your *Polis* needed an *ekklesia*.

Does that word sound familiar? It should! It's where we get the word “ecclesiastical” from. If you look up “ecclesiastical”, this is the sort of definition you'll find: **“of or relating to the church or the clergy; churchly; clerical; not secular.”**

Obviously that's not what that word meant back in the First Century! So what did it mean? It meant **“Political Assembly”** – the place where the affairs of the *Polis* were discussed and settled, where decisions were made about the Polis and – by definition – about its inhabitants. So actually, that's the opposite of what it means now! It meant “secular,” “not relating to the Church,” “relating to municipal governance.”

But here's the thing: St. Paul uses that word – *ekklesia* – frequently. And he did so exactly because of what it meant – that it was a place where the followers of Jesus came together to discuss and settle the affairs of the community.

It's clear that the way Paul differentiated his political assemblies' s from the local community's political assemblies was he always understood the communities he founded – the *ekklesia* he founded – to be “*en Christo*”....”in Christ.”

There are a couple of important points here: first, the communities Paul founded were all in

Roman administrative centers – all were “Polis’ s”. In calling these new communities “ekklesias” he was making both a comparison and a contrast. The contrast was that – unlike the Roman *ekklesia* where only landholding men could speak, in the *ekklesia en christo* Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, men and women (Gal 3:28) all had a voice. The comparison was that Paul considered all of his communities to be *ekklesia*: “political assemblies” like the Roman “political assemblies.”

Given what Paul consistently says – as one standing in the long tradition of Jewish Prophets who spoke long and frequently about community involvement – it’s quite clear that he saw an overlapping involvement – that the members of his *ekklesia* should be engaging with the Roman *ekklesia*.

For these Pauline Christians, these followers of Jesus there was an expectation that they would be fully engaged in the entirety of the life of their local community – their local *Polis* – AND that they should be engaged out of their identity of those who had been “baptized into Christ.”

Christian identity wasn’t then, and isn’t now something limited, something that ends at the walls of an *ekklesia*, a church. Our ancient identity is to be held and embraced in and in front of the whole community. Or, to put it another way, the Political Assembly in Christ was to take it’s core values into the Political Assembly of Rome and engage that Political Assembly out if its Christian values. And, today, the Political Assembly of the Episcopal Church, and every one of its congregations, is to take our values as Christians into the Political Assembly of Washington State, and the United States of America, and to engage that assembly, those people, our fellow citizens, out of our values as Christians.

In a sense, I - as the official institutional representative of our church – I AM telling you now to vote! I’m telling you because I’m saying that your vote has to be predicated on your faith as a follower of Jesus.

The baptismal covenant, coming out of the teachings and traditions of Jesus Christ and St. Paul, and the community they birthed, sums up that faith. It says to us that we are to engage the world – you are to engage the world – from your identity as a worshiping believer who is part of a worshiping community. You are to confront and challenge all that’s destructive of human community and human flourishing AND any who engage in behaviors that are destructive of human community and human flourishing. You are to be aware of your own weaknesses, and out of that recognition to share with others your experience of the life-giving truth that you have found in Jesus Christ. You are to serve those in need. You are to respect the dignity of every human being, no matter the color of their skin, the country of their origin, the faith they espouse, the person they love; or the politics they hold.

I’ve heard some of you say that you don’t think anyone should be telling you how to vote. I wholeheartedly agree with that. If I, as an individual, were to tell you how to vote, you are personally well within your rights to tell me to take a hike!

But here’s the thing: If I, as an expositor of the Gospel,

So how do we exercise that servanthood? Do you remember the two great commandments? 8 o'clockers are pretty good at this, because they used to hear these two repeated every week! "The first great commandment is this: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments all faith hangs."

We are called to be servants of love - not just within the walls of this place, but outside it, too.

Now before you get all gooey on me I want to say that we need to be cautious about that word "love." Of course it can mean romantic love. But that's not how it's used in the gospels. I've heard it described like this when attributed to God: "God's providential care of and for the world."

St. Paul saw it as an active way of changing the world, but only when that love was "in Christ".

So my invitation to you is to see yourself for what you have been made: a minister, which is a servant - and then consider ways in which you can serve not only this community of faith, but the world beyond it. Amen.