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Date: October 2, 2016
Sermon Title: Faith and Politics
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: 1 Samuel 8:6-22

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But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to govern us.' Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.'

So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, 'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.'

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, 'No! But we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.' When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. The LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to their voice

and set a king over them.' Samuel then said to the people of Israel, 'Each of you return home.'

I'm sorry for sounding like an old fogey, but I remember when voting was viewed as a sacred privilege. The first time I voted, I dressed up in a suit and tie ("Church clothes," we called them). I was nervous going into the voting booth, and I spent so much time reading all the instructions that a poll worker tugged on the curtain to see if I was O.K. Even now, when I vote and I get one of those "I VOTED" stickers to put on my coat, I walk around the rest of the day with my chest puffed out as though I'd done something special, noble, important, good.

I had some good sermon titles for today, something like "Trump vs. Clinton," "David's 'How to Vote Right'" or, "Whom You Should Vote For: Never Mind; It's Illegal." Alida vetoed each title. She knew I was only trying to provoke you.

We've actually discussed these things at our adult class, "Religion in the News." It is illegal for a charitable organization, a tax-exempt organization, to use its position to push a political candidate. Of course, it happens. Some Churches issue "Voter Guides," telling you which candidates favor or oppose policies that are favored or opposed by that Church. Some Churches invite politicians to speak from the pulpit during worship, a sort of "wink-wink" endorsement.

Some pastors announce who is *not* welcome, and in the last few years there has been a movement by some preachers to challenge the IRS. They will preach overtly political sermons, endorse candidates, and send the sermons to the IRS, daring them to shut them down

Me, I'm an old Baptist. I mean a Baptist of the old kind, a "Separation of Church and state" Baptist. For the last three or four years, I've told anyone who would listen to read John Barrie's biography of Roger Williams. Roger Williams was the 17th-century Puritan who fled religious persecution in Massachusetts and went to Rhode Island, establishing the first colony built on the principle of "separation of Church and state." Church and state should stay out of each other's pockets, stay out of each other's shadows. Church and state are not disinterested in each other, but they are neither to be joined at the hip, nor a hindrance or an endorsement to each other.

The role of the Church, not just in 2016, but also in every generation, the role of the Church is to be truly the "loyal opposition." We are not in power,

we are never in power; by definition, we are always on the outside, but with loving loyalty.

In that wonderful hymn, "America the Beautiful," we all proudly sing, "O beautiful for spacious skies." But in the other verses we sing, "May God thy gold refine" and "God mend thine every flaw." If I may grossly oversimplify, the state protects "O beautiful"; the Church "refines the gold" and "mends the flaws." We are the "loyal opposition" in every age, in every election, to every candidate. I said to someone the other day that the nature of the state is to DIRECT; the nature of the Church is to REDIRECT.

Governments come and go, even forms of government come and go. The Democratic Party of today is not the Democratic Party of the last century or the 1800s. The Republican Party of today is hardly the Republican Party of 1980 or 1860. Democracy itself is not a Biblical concept, even though the seeds of a thriving democracy may be there. For the most part, the Bible is wary of governing authority, fearing that power becomes of God in itself.

Our Scripture for today gives the clearest warning. At the time of the Scripture, about 3,000 years ago, the idea of the nation-state was still a new concept, and Israel was still a new nation. As they evolved from a single family to a wandering tribe to a people with a singular identity and finally to a nation with its own land, they had been led by a patchwork of dynamic people: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Samuel. But suddenly, they wanted a king. Everybody else had a king, neighboring nations had a king, and Israel wanted a king.

In our Scripture, God tries to warn them, and my goodness, is God on target, or what? God says, "You don't want a king, trust me. All they do is take your sons off to war, take your daughters to work in the palace, take your fields to pay for the war and the palace. He will bite off a part of everything you have until you have nothing left to call your own. Then you will go running to God. But the people responded, "Yeah, we like that! We like big people in fancy dress with grand palaces and trumpets blaring when they enter and banners and pageantry and people bowing and cheering and a strong military and lots of security, and it won't really be as bad as God said . . . will it?"

Well, history proved God right. And that's not a commentary on government or politics; it's a commentary on human nature. There are just enough people in the world who really, really, really love power to ruin any kind of government. And there are just enough people in the world who prefer to stay on the sidelines to keep the power lovers in power. It doesn't take

many bad apples to ruin it for everyone. The role of faith, of Church, is to keep everyone's eyes open.

The Bible often talks about "watchmen" and "watchtowers." In the old days people lived in fortress-like cities, with big walls to keep out invaders, and spaced around the walls were "watchtowers," and along the walls were "watchmen." The safety of everybody depended on the diligence of the "watchmen."

Some of us, old enough, when we hear the word "watchtower," we immediately think of Jimi Hendrix singing "All Along the Watchtower," but in his world the watchmen don't do their job.

*"There's too much confusion," Hendrix sings,
"I can't get no relief.
Business men – they drink my wine.
Plowmen dig my earth
None of them along the line.
Know what any of it is worth."*

Maybe Jimi Hendrix knew his Bible. The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah weren't impressed by the watchmen of their day. Jeremiah said, "I set a watchmen over you, and I told them, 'Listen for the sound of the trumpet'; but they said, 'We will not listen.'" (Jeremiah 6:17) Isaiah is even harsher: "The watchmen are blind, all of them are mute dogs refusing to bark, dreamers lying down who love to sleep." (Isaiah 6:10)

Down through history the Church has too often been asleep at the wheel, refusing to listen for warning trumpets, "mute dogs unwilling to bark." If so, we fail both Church and state.

Now we have an election upon us that has us all in a tizzy. Half the country really dislikes one candidate; the other half really dislikes the other candidate. Some are grumbling about voting for the "lesser of two evils," and holding your nose while you vote, not the most encouraging approach.

But I'll tell you what *is* encouraging. We have quite a number of young people in our Church, aged 15 to 28, who are deeply interested in politics, deeply committed, who want to dig in, get involved, and make a difference.

They're all over the spectrum, politically, but they have certain things in common: faith, spiritual values; these kids grew up here, raised by good parents, trained by a good Church; and determination, they have oomph

and energy and conviction. I look at them, and I see "America the Beautiful" with our "gold being refined" and our "flaws being mended."

Our Church Bible Study this fall has been fascinating. We are looking at what the Bible says about "leadership." The Bible is thousands of years old. It doesn't talk about elections, political parties, voting, or what we associate with the political process. But it does say a lot about leadership. So far we've looked at Abraham, Moses, Mary, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Deborah, David, Solomon, and last week, Jesus. And we've seen enough to draw some conclusions. The best leaders are a mixture of humility, even reluctance, and boldness, even arrogance. Most didn't seek leadership, and when offered it, didn't think they were ready or up to it. But each of them, once convinced, was full-speed ahead.

My favorite is Solomon. King David dies, Israel is a mess, and young Solomon becomes king. But he's no dummy. First thing he does is he goes to Church to pray, to talk with God, to get some help. God says, "O.K., what do you need?" Solomon says, "Well, Number 1, I am in way over my head. I'm inexperienced." He actually says, "I am a child." So Solomon says, "Give me a discerning heart . . . *a discerning heart*, to know right from wrong." (1 Kings 3:4-9)

He is asking for the ability to look hard, dig deep, take time, think through, and ultimately decide on the basis of what is right. Not what is expedient. Popular. Fulfilling a campaign promise. Paying back a donor. But what is right.

In the midst of that conversation, Solomon uttered a phrase so prophetic, so timely, so apt for us right now. He says to God, "Who will honor and govern this great people?" I don't know if he said it with exasperation, admiration, and doubt, fear, or humor. But it's the kind of self-awareness and humility that made him great. "Who on earth can govern this great people?" That is, this is tough, this is big. I need help.

Folks, we are a great people, we are "America the Beautiful," even if our "gold" needs some refining and our "flaws," a little mending. We are a great people, 350 million strong. That means 350 million opinions, 350 million ideas of what should be done, 350 million priorities; and, if we each had our way, 350 million political parties, each with one seat in Congress. But that is not how it works. This is where Church can help state.

In Church, in good Church, we are not in it for ourselves. We are in it for others. This past week our Bible Study focused on Jesus as a leader, a theory popularized as "Servant Leadership," the leadership undertaken for

others. Jesus was crystal clear when he washed his disciples' feet. He said flat out, "I am your leader, darn tootin', you call me 'Lord,' and yes, I am your Lord. So if I am willing to get down on my hands and knees, if I am willing to literally bow before you, if I'm willing to humble myself to wash your feet, then what do you think you're supposed to do, huh?"

"I have set you an example," Jesus emphasizes, "*I have set you an example* —in my kingdom, in my Church, in my political party, the greatest must be willing to be the least. The first must be O.K. with going the last." In Jesus's language, to "Lord it over" somebody is to wash their feet. Now there is a vision of leadership.

Recently *The New York Times* had an article about the first black man to be mayor of Phenix City, Alabama. A former linebacker for Alabama football, a devout Christian, he's trying to convert the centuries-old racial divisions of that deep Alabama town. His political philosophy is straightforward: "Don't be a 'caitiff,'" he says, "be a 'sho nuff' leader. Don't make it about yourself. Love people. Lead by example." (Fausset, Richard. "Having Won Re-election, a Black Mayor Is Out to Win Every Voter's Heart." *The New York Times* 20 Sept. 2016: A11. Print.)

I had to look up the word "caitiff." The man knows his Shakespeare. "Caitiff" means "base, cowardly, a despicable person." So that's his plan. "Don't be a cowardly despicable person. Be a sho nuff leader. Love people. Lead by example."

Today's sermon may not get you ready for November 8, but maybe we can lay the groundwork for when our young people take the reins of leadership.

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, "In Christ There Is No East or West," No. 687.

*In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one community of love
throughout the whole wide earth.*

*In Christ shall true hearts ev'rywhere
their high communion find;
his service is the golden cord,
close binding humankind.*

*Join hands, disciples of the faith,
whate'er your race may be;
all children of the living God
are surely kin to me.*

*In Christ now meet both east and west,
in him meet south and north:
all loving hearts are one in him
throughout the whole wide earth.*