

Proper 25, Year A
Matthew 22: 34-46
October 26, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

What Do You Bring To The Ballot Box?
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Do you remember the movie “Network”? It’s an old movie, but one that has a certain currency to it. It’s the story of a TV newscaster who is fired from his job but who is given one last moment to say farewell to his audience. He takes that moment to launch into a rant about the condition of the country—hard times, banks going bust, violence—a litany familiar to us today. He then stands up and asks the television audience to go to their windows, open them and yell, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.”

There are times when I find myself wanting to join in that chorus, wanting to yell, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” This week was one such time. Each day as I opened the newspaper, I found myself reading another story in which violence was the subtext—violence to people, violence to the truth, violence to human decency, violence to the spirit of forgiveness and forbearance that permeates the Gospel. On Thursday, I read the story of middle schoolers in a St. Louis suburb who included in their spirit week along with crazy hat day, hit a tall person day, and followed that with “Hit a Jew day” thus sanctioning anti-Semitic violence. Just yesterday I read a story about yet another black person being dragged to death in Paris, Texas. Sandwiched between the two were many stories pointing to the violence to the truth that so permeates this campaign season. No wonder I find myself ready to go to the window and scream, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” But that’s not what the Gospel calls us to and that’s not what the situation demands. Indeed, that kind of response only intensifies the level of violence.

The Gospel calls us to a different ethic—an ethic of love. When asked “What commandment in the law is greatest?” Jesus replies, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus wasn’t talking about an attitude. He was talking about a way of living. The love Jesus calls us to, *hesed*, means steadfast love. In the Hebrew scriptures it is usually linked with two other words—justice and mercy. In the book of Hosea, God says to the people of God, “I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and mercy.” The prophet Micah reminds the people, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

What does God require? Steadfast love. The kind of love that Jesus lives—a love that gathers children in its midst; a love that heals lepers with a touch.

Active love. The kind of love that sees a person in need and responds accordingly—feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison.

Inclusive love. A love that brooks no boundaries. A love that seeks justice for all of God's children—male and female, black and white, gay and straight, Gentile and Jew.

A love that wills the well-being of others without regard to their merit. The kind of love God shows to us—a forgiving and forbearing kind of love.

A love that counteracts the violence of our days.

As I listen to the vitriolic rhetoric of this campaign season, as I see the violence done to the truth as people seek to advance their candidate or their cause, I find myself remembering another campaign, another set of candidates, another season.

The year was 1978. My father-in-law was running for Governor of Massachusetts. It was an uphill battle. He was a Republican in a Democratic state. He was candid about his beliefs—his commitment to the environment, his opposition to the war, his support for a woman's right to choose—not all popular positions. Yet he was closing the gap. It looked like he might win. Folks were attracted by his solid reputation for serving the state with integrity. They liked the way he often stood above partisan politics. And then, the week-end before the election, Roman Catholic bishops in the Dioceses of Worcester and Fall River put out the word—"tell your parishioners not to vote for Frank Hatch." His goose was cooked. He lost by 100,000 votes. For years those sermons preached the Sunday before the election stuck in the craw of his supporters.

I do not believe that any priest or minister or rabbi or imam has the right to tell anyone who to vote for. Partisan politics has no place in the pulpit. Our primary relationship is not with a party but with God—the One who calls us to act with love and work for justice.

Remember that as you prepare to cast your ballot, for casting a ballot is one of the most important ways we, as people of faith, can bear witness to God's love and justice. Make voting a prayerful act. As you take your ballot in your hand, spend some time in prayer. Reflect on those two great commandments—love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Ask yourself how the decisions you are making reflect God's active and inclusive love. Look for the thread of justice and mercy in the propositions set before you. And then cast your ballot remembering that God working in us and through us can do far more than we ourselves can do. Amen.