

**Sermon by Jane Larsen-Wigger
Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church
September 7, 2008**

Matthew 18:18-20
Romans 13:8-12

(Before reading the passage from Matthew)

Most of the 18th chapter of Matthew talks about children. Jesus brings up the subject when his ego-centric disciples inquire as to who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus summons a child at that point—to make his point. Keep your eye and heart on the little ones. Then you'll learn not just about greatness—but about the kingdom of heaven as well.

And that lesson leads into how followers of Christ are to live together in this world (*Read Matthew 18:18-20*).

(Before reading the passage from Romans)

In the verses leading up to today's Epistle reading, Paul is dealing with a Christian citizen's obligations to the State, urging civic duty. But then he reminds us of other obligations too (*Read Romans 13:8-12*).

The Sunday school curriculum we use with our children is called "Seasons of the Spirit." It sets the seasons of the church year as the background for learning: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost. And then that long season between Pentecost (somewhere around the end of May) until Advent begins (usually right after Thanksgiving). That means about half of the year—six months—is simply thought of as Ordinary Time. It's a long stretch. And so, as we begin a new Sunday School year we are right in the middle of this longest "Season of the Spirit."

As Americans, we're also, if you haven't noticed, in the midst of another season—one that is just heating up—even though it's been going on even longer than Ordinary Time. This season hit its frenzy these past two weeks with the Democratic and Republican National conventions. It is tempting to see this political season as unrelated to the "Seasons of the Spirit" that we're engaged by here. After all, isn't the Spirit depicted often as a Dove that "soars in spiritual heights above mundane, earthly affairs, that focuses on the heavenly realm that *really* matters?" (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year A, After Pentecost*, Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, Tucker, Abingdon, 1987, page 175)

But, if we hear Paul right in his letter to the Roman Christians, "there is no place . . . for a kind of Christian spirituality that is so superior to civic responsibilities and the political process as to be indifferent toward them. . . Paul speaks of Christian duty that lives with its eyes open to political realities. . . (What he has) in mind here is Christian service that

encompasses rather than denies civic duty..." (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary: Year A, After Pentecost*, Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, Tucker, Abingdon, 1987, pages 174-175)

An interview with a delegate at one of the conventions woke me up to this reality. I say, 'woke me up' in the most literal sense of that term—sometimes it was probably boredom, sometimes a form of defense, but I found myself often drifting off while watching both conventions. But, one comment roused me:

Roaming around the convention floor in search of sound bites from delegates, a reporter caught one that went something like this: "Well, I think we just need to show some love. You know, like the old religions used to say: 'Love your neighbor.'"

"Like the old religions USED to say?????"

This comment struck me as right in so many ways. Partly because 'old' Paul said the same thing—in relation to our civic responsibilities. And partly because of the kernel of conviction in that "USED to say".

How seriously have we followers of Jesus been in following Jesus' law of love? In following it even into the public, civic arena? Do our actions, our involvements, our voting, our obligations to the State reflect our primary obligation to love our neighbors? Or have we been guilty of separating the two realms—acting like the seasons of the Spirit aren't connected to the seasons of the State [periods of politics]? That the spiritual realm is above the mundane ordinariness of every day life?

How appropriate then that this political season falls smack in the midst of the church's season of "Ordinary Time" — calling us to lay our commitments to the spiritual on top of our commitments to the political—sort of like a translucent layer of film that enlightens what is seen through it.

So, how do we do that? How do we walk through these next couple of months in particular—practicing our faith as an act of civic responsibility/duty/stewardship?

Well, today is a good start, or a good reminder, anyway, of some of the things that will help us do that. Simply being here on a Sunday morning. Showing up to participate in this community that is seeking to be formed by Christ. A community that takes the Word of God seriously. A community that puts the Word into the hands of our children and teaches that Word across the generations. A community that meets to confess where we have fallen short of the command to love and then to eat together at the Table set by the Lord of Love...sharing with others the same morsels of forgiveness, the same drops of grace that are offered to us so freely. These are good practices, ones that will help us start to see the world more through the film of divine compassion.

There's one other, really important thing we can do these days, though. And that is to keep children where Jesus put them: right in the middle of it all. Front and center in our

consciousness. Because a child will remind us most of what's important. Help us understand love not in some esoteric idealistic way, but in the snotty, needy messiness of innocent lives.

There's nothing like a child to wake one up. If you've ever slept in the same house as a crying baby or been around little ones on a Christmas morning or gone on a retreat or camping trip with youth you know this. Kids can wake you up—and keep you awake! By keeping children in our sights we'll have a better chance of staying alert to how God's law of love can work in the social context of this country. Because when we can see what is best for the littlest among us, we'll understand what's best for us all. Simply by their presence we learn what is important—even start to understand the Kingdom of God.

Today we are beginning what might be the most important political activity any of us do this fall. We are, as a community and individually, being called on to participate in a 40-day prayer vigil for children. There's something both biblical and practical about forty days. Among other things it hearkens back to Jesus' forty days in the wilderness prior to the beginning of his earthly ministry. But from what I've heard, forty days is also about the time it takes to make something a habit.

And so we are invited, for forty days, to put a child front and center in our prayers. We will soon pass around baskets that contain cards with the names of each of the children and youth of this church. You're invited, encouraged really, to take one (not your child—hopefully you're already praying for her or him!). In taking a name you are also obligating yourself to pray for that child on a regular basis—daily would be best—for the next six weeks. One form of intercessory prayer that might be helpful is to simply hold this child—or their name—in your mind and then in your imagination surround that child with light. The light of God's love.

In time, I think you'll find you can't pray for only one child. Because soon that light of Love will start expanding to other children you know. And then to children you don't know but maybe read about in the papers. Those who are caught in the cracks of our health care system. Those who have just been uprooted once again by hurricanes or neglect. Those whose parents have lost their jobs. Those who are going to bed hungry. Those for whom learning is a burden and not a joy.

That light of Love will also start to illuminate how you see and engage with the mundane, earthly affairs of this political season. And hopefully in time the whole concept of loving our neighbor will not be something the old religions USED to say, but something we Christians actually live—and vote.