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“Figuring Things Out”

2 Samuel 6:1-19

Read the scripture online (NSRV): <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=210795887>

Anyone who says that religion and politics aren't connected hasn't read the Bible—or the history books, or the newspaper. For better or worse, faith and politics have a history of being deeply intertwined. On the personal level and on the corporate level, faith and politics tend to compel one another in an almost chicken-and-egg like cycle of engagement, leaving it hard to tell if faith drives politics or if politics drives faith.

King David is no different. His own monarchy was marked with God's favor and his own courageous calculation. Anointed by God years before when he just a shepherd boy, our text picks up just after David assumes the throne. Saul has died, having committed suicide in battle against the Philistines, and all of his sons have died in battle. It is David's turn now, and the Israelites appoint him king in Hebron. His first political act was to go to battle: first conquering the Jebusites in Jerusalem, and then defeating the Philistines. But his second act is that which gets our focus today: bringing the ark of God back into the center of Israelite life once again.

Our text picks up with David and 30,000 Israelite men setting out to bring the ark of God out of the house of Aminidab and into Jerusalem. Their procession is full of music and dancing. Scripture tells us that David and his men were celebrating before the Lord with all their might. They sang songs, played harps, lyres, tambourines, and cymbals. Their joy was not contained. With a procession of praise, David's monarchy is marked with a sign of anointing. He brings the ark to Jerusalem as a reminder that God dwells there. God dwells with the Israelites; God dwells with him.

But the text itself paints a more complicated picture of God than our lectionary-writers share. The lectionary text offers us a continuous stream of praise, a parade of power and meaning, of national and spiritual significance. But the text shares with us that the parade was interrupted when tragedy struck. Verses 6-11 tell us that Uzzah, a bearer of the ark, reached out his hand to keep the ark from falling. But rather than receiving thanks or honor, Uzzah was struck dead, punished by God because of his irreverence.

David, like us, cannot make sense of this event. How can a God so good and so mighty strike down the one who was doing his best to help out? How could God let this happen? Consumed by fear and overwhelmed with anger, David stops the parade, hides the ark in the home of Obed-Edom, and sets aside his plan.

So: how does the parade pick back up again? Where does David find the wherewithal to continue the procession? David does not get the answers for which he is looking. God doesn't explain God's actions, and God doesn't make amends. But another aspect of God's character does come to the foreground with enough force for the parade to resume. The text tells us that David remembers that God is a God of blessing. David



sees that abundance and grace impact the lives of those housing the ark; he hears reports of God's blessing in the life and household of Obed-Edom, and he wants some of that! David begins to realize that even in the face of tragedy, God blesses God's people. Tragedy doesn't stop the flow of blessings that stream from God through countless other channels. David is again reminded that God is, primarily, a God of blessing. And a God of blessing is a God worthy of praise.

What is key, as the story resumes, is that as David's parade takes to the streets again, something has changed. As the details of the parade unfold it is clear that the procession is a lot less about him and a lot more about God. It is a lot less about proving a political point, a lot less about securing his monarchy with a unifying symbol of Israelite faith—and it is a whole lot more focused on God. As David resumes his dancing, we see that he approaches the procession, and God, a little bit differently the second time. Aware of God's power and might, David approaches the ark in a state of awe. David is not clothed in kingly garments that emphasize his own worldly power, but rather clothes himself in a linen ephod, a priestly garment, and calls attention to God's power. After those carrying the ark had just taken six steps, David stopped and sacrificed a bull and fatted calf, now remembering that God alone is worthy of being praised. And when they arrive at their destination, David gives thanks, approaching God with a measure of humility and gratitude, aware that God's blessing is a gift.

Just two weeks ago, we crowded with over 800 other Presbyterians into our hot sanctuary, praising God with brass and songs on the Sunday morning of the 220th General Assembly (GA) of the PC(USA). Many have told me of how moving it was to be singing in the sanctuary among so many other, hearty, joyful voices.

Yet as the week of deliberation proceeded at the Convention Center it was evident, in good ways and in bad, how deeply intertwined our faith is to our politics. The two most "hotly debated" overtures that came before GA were about issues that were profoundly political: the first, the debate around whether to divest in companies that profited from the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, was defeated by two votes; the second the debate around whether to change language in our Book of Order naming marriage as a covenant between "two people," rather than maintaining language that defines marriage as a covenant between a "man and a woman," was defeated by nearly 30 votes. Such a language change in our Book of Order would have formally honored and sanctioned marriage between two men or two women, coming alongside legislation that upholds same-sex marriage, particularly in states where marriage is legal.

At its best, GA was an opportunity to see the church was trying to figure out how to be church in this post-modern world. At its best, our discourse and voting together, our "decently and orderly" proceedings, are an attempt to enact our faith, to be people of faith in a way that is culturally relevant. It was also clear that the church, in its discernment (in our discernment) is divided. At times our unity in Christ was evident even when the division was profound. But at times it was clear that back-door politics and threats to commandeer our parliamentary process undermined our unity as a denomination.



For example, in an unprecedented move, the Vice Moderator of the General Assembly, the Rev. Tara Spuhler McCabe, resigned after controversy erupted over her having officiated the marriage of two women in Washington D.C. In her address to the assembly, Rev. McCabe cited unhelpful, divisive tweets and blogs and threats of derailing plenary as motivation for her resignation. She said, "Because I have great appreciation and affection for this church and our process, I am deeply concerned that some within our community here plan to use parliamentary order, among other things, in a way that will serve as a stumbling block to us, keeping us from tending to the vital business that is before us as the General Assembly ... I am resigning as your Vice Moderator."

So how can we be church, be the Church Universal, be the PC(USA), be ELPC, or simply be a man or woman or child of faith in a political world, where our engagement in both personal, ecclesiastical and world politics has both the power to bear witness to the love and justice of God in Christ and the power to breed hate and the furtherance of one's self-serving agenda? How can we engage in our faith and culture in a way that bears witness to the best of God's love, when too often it ends up showing us at our worst?

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Because we are human, which is to say essentially self-interested, we are always looking for ways to add a little more authority to our causes, to come up with better reasons to fight for what we want than "Because I want it, that's why." If we can convince ourselves that God wants it, too, even if that means making God in our own image so we can deny the image of God in our enemies, then we are free to engage in combative piety. We are free to harm others not for our own reasons but in the name of God, which allows us to feel holy about doing it instead of just plain bad.¹

How can we avoid this "combative piety" and truly live out God's will for our lives? How can we let our faith lead us in our engagement in the world, that our politics might reflect God's love and gracious justice? How can we be both faithful and political people, engaging in our faith and engaging in the world, in a manner that integrates God's love into every aspect of our lives and likewise allows our lives to bear witness to God's radically hospitable, gracious love?

Our text offers some clues. First, our scripture invites us to shift our approach to one that places God in the center of our universe rather than placing ourselves in the center of God's universe. As David's dance shifted its focus from David's sovereignty to God's, so must our lives make such a shift too. This requires prayer, humility, self-examination, and courage, so that Christ is the ever-present center of our lives.

And we must ardently pursue God, getting to know God for who God is, seeking to understand God's word in its entirety and not simply searching God's word for snapshots of the God we want to see, picking verses that make good bumper stickers in support of our causes.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in this World*. P 99.



We need to honor our own humanity, not confusing it with the divinity of the God we praise. And then we need to likewise honor the full humanity of our brothers and sisters all around us, everywhere. We need to see that our needs as a human family are not being met when others in this world are hungry or naked or persecuted or afraid. And we need to get over ourselves a little. Well, maybe a lot. Not being so wrapped up in what others think of us, of our own status or power, of strategies that further our own agendas. We need to let go of appearances, allow the Spirit to take over, put our whole heart into it, and dance. Dance in praise. Dance in community. Dance before our God.

