

My buddy Steve has a saying: God is not your magic trick. It's tempting to fall into the trap of the disciples telling Jesus "we want you to do whatever we ask." Problem is, I do want Jesus to do whatever I ask. But thank God, it doesn't work like that. I'm not saying prayer doesn't work, I'm just saying the impulse to use God to benefit myself isn't the way. Now, most of us probably aren't all that threatened by that idea. Most of us have prayed enough to get it. But some just can't shake the "ask and ye shall receive" of it all. That's a fine impulse, but we gotta be aware of what we're praying for and more importantly, whether or not what we pray for lines up with the values of the Kingdom of God. Like, I don't think God cares all that much, in spite of my deeply sincere prayers to the contrary, if I hit a red light and show up late to work. I suspect there's other things on God's mind. It's not that prayer doesn't matter, it's just that prayer might not be what we think. I don't know how God deals with it, but I do know that prayer changes me. It's not that my prayer makes God do whatever I want, it's that my prayer makes me face my own shortcomings. What do I want to see change in the world? Prayer helps me realize that I'm not always working to change what I wish God would. Too often, when we approach prayer as a magic trick, what we're really doing is using it as an excuse. If I pray for God to fix something, it's real tempting to take a step back and wait, and if I'm waiting for God to do the work, that often means I'm not. A few weeks ago, I introduced the St. Ignatius quote, "Pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on you." Prayer isn't an excuse not to act, and it's not our magic trick. At its best, our prayers line up with the values of the Kingdom of God.

So, what do our prayers ask God for? How many of our prayers are self-serving? How few of my prayers put other people first? How many of my prayers are focused on a certain Tuesday in November? I'm not saying they shouldn't be, I'm just aware of how different mine have been lately. Character and truth and meanness sure are front of my mind, and my prayers keep going back to 'em. But there's a piece I've been missing that feels obvious in retrospect but only just started to make sense with this reading. See, we're looking at an entire ballot, top to bottom, of people trying to become public servants. At least, that's what we're looking at in theory. It occurs to me that not everyone on the ballot wants to be a servant. I mean, really, who does? It's much nicer when people serve you. Life is easier, you get everything you want, you don't have to lift a finger unless you choose to. You get the idea. It's pretty cushy being served. But that's not what leadership is. Leadership is down in the dirt with the rest of the people, or sometimes down in the dirt in place of the people. Serving isn't easy or fun or even all that enjoyable. Serving isn't about personal comfort. Serving's about putting everyone else's comfort, safety, needs, and life ahead of your own.

When Jesus heard his disciples grumbling over who's Number 1, he reminded them of what the Gentiles do. Remember, "Gentiles" can be a sort of shorthand for "people that've got it all wrong." The leaders of the people that've got it all wrong lord their position over the people. The greatest ones--"greatest" meaning most powerful not best at being really really good--the greatest ones, the most powerful ones are tyrants. But for followers of Jesus, the greatest, the most powerful, the real leader's leaders are servants. Real leaders strive to serve not to be served. Real leaders lay down their lives to save others. And they're not just servants of a handful, of the ones they like, or of the ones that can give them something in return. Real leaders serve all and sacrifice for all. I don't know what's in the hearts of those folks running for office across this country. I know some of them are true servant leaders and some aren't. Some it's hard to tell, some it's just not. You've heard it a dozen times a day for the last couple of months, but the best way to tell is that old maxim, "you will know them by their fruits."

Now look, I can't tell you what your political beliefs should be any more than a politician can tell you what your religious beliefs should be. If you want the two to be distinct, you can do that. Some folks want church to stay contained to this one hour a week. That's not a judgment, it's just how some people are, which is fine. But if you think your religion and your politics should line up, if you want what you do in the voting booth to reflect the faith you profess every week, there's some things you need to take into account before you cast that vote. Servanthood is right at the top. Who will serve and who seeks to be served? If that doesn't quite fit, maybe change it up: who will be loyal and who demands loyalty? Fear is another. The phrase, "Be not afraid," occurs about 150 times in our scriptures. Who seeks to calm your worry, and who stirs up your fear? And then there's love. "Love God, love your neighbor," Jesus says is the greatest commandment. He never says who that neighbor is, but scripture tells us to treat foreigners no differently than anyone else, prioritize the poor over the rich, seek the welfare of the cities we reside in, and put the needs of others before our own. Who encourages you to love your neighbor? And who seeks to deport your neighbor, serves the interests of the wealthy, intends to dismantle public services, and demands total fealty? Voting starts soon, mail-in and early locations are bracing for an influx of the enfranchised. It'll be another couple of weeks before we know how this all turns out. I can't tell you who to vote for. I can tell you what the Bible and our tradition say about lots of policies. I can't tell you if any of the candidates are good Christians, but I can tell you some have shown they absolutely are not.

I saw a quote the other day. It said, "Vote your hope, not your fear." I loved it, at first. I don't want my life ruled by fear. I want hope to be a defining characteristic of me and my nation. But also, there's real fear behind the urgency of my preaching. To be clear, it's not fear that someone that doesn't act like a Christian will be in office. I couldn't care less what, if any, religion the president is. The real fear is that someone will continue to use a distortion of Christianity to control, target, and eradicate. This is not empty fear mongering; this is the reality of the choice we face. We've seen this before, and we know the fruits. There's every indication that those fruits will only get more rotten, and with them, our personal freedom and safety, perhaps even the religious freedom to say what we believe is and should be true.

When you sit down in the kitchen or slouch over a cocktail table to fill out your ballot, please, remember your faith. You vote in private. No one gets to know how you do. But one day you may have to answer for that vote. May it be a vote for service, for neighbors, for hope, and for love. It won't be a vote for Jesus, but it doesn't have to be an active vote against Jesus either.

I'll put this differently. On Sundays, we pray for all sorts of things, including the nation and "those who work for justice, freedom, and peace." May those prayers come to fruition. I can't make y'all vote one way any more than I make God do whatever I ask, so I'll leave you with this: if you are here, you're at least interested in some aspect of Christianity; when you reach the Pearly Gates, may you never have to explain why you voted contrary to that interest.