CITIZENS OF HEAVEN AND CITIZENS OF THE USA AUGUST 11, 2024, TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, BLUE HILL

Do you all remember the last time you recited the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America? We don't say it or hear it very much any more, but you might still recall the words "ONE NATION, UNDER GOD, INDIVISIBLE". Minus the words "under God", which were added in 1954, the pledge was written in 1885 by Capt. George T. Balch. Capt. Balch was a veteran of the Civil War, an experience which surely gave him a special perspective on the concept of an "INDIVISIBLE" nation. The Civil War is the closest our country has ever come to losing our "indivisibility".

Anybody following our current media today, might be justified in wondering if we are teetering on the brink of again risking our "indivisible" status. While it is certainly appropriate for political candidates to argue about one another's policies and platforms, it is concerning that we hear both candidates and citizens calling each other names, impugning each other's IQs, questioning their worth as human beings and even questioning their right to live!

As a nation, our politicians and our citizenry seem to have lost all respect for one another and have sunk to a new low in our inability to communicate with any civility.

What are we to do? Shall we join the fray, verbal weapons drawn, telling the other side just what we think of them and where they should go? Should we turn off the news and try to hide out until after the election, lest our minds and our hearts be contaminated by the vituperative spate of hate speech? Should we try to find some ideal ground in which we reserve our blistering rhetoric only for those who have delivered theirs to us?

Let's stop for a moment and think. Think about how blest we are to live in a country in which each of us has a voice. No, it's not a perfect country, nor does

it have a perfect government. Of course, no organization made up of fallible human beings can be perfect; even if it were, we would still find things not to like about it. (You can't please everybody all of the time.)

But our democratic republic is indeed a noble experiment. Democracy worked in ancient Greece, where there was a government after which ours is partially modeled. Unfortunately, it was limited only to those elites who were considered citizens, as it was in our country at its inception. Today, forms of democracy are working in countries as geographically far flung as Iceland and New Zealand, to name just a couple. Even what was, 85 years ago, one of the world's most infamous fascist countries, Germany, is now a democracy. And our version of democracy, or democratic republic, here in the US has worked for approximately 250 years. It has been tested, but, thus far, has survived the test.

At the risk of being accused of blasphemy, I have to say that there is nothing in Scripture that says that democracy is God's ideal form of government. In fact, there's nothing in Scripture that says anything at all about democracy. There's nothing in Scripture that says that ANY form of government is God's ideal. When we first meet the Jews in the Old Testament, they were being governed by judges. But the Jews looked around at neighboring tribes and saw that many of these tribes had kings. They were a bit jealous, so they asked God to give them kings. God did, and He gave them some remarkable ones, ie. David and Solomon.

What Scripture DOES tell us about government is this: Rom. 13:1 "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God."

Now, in the US, those authorities are chosen by--- us. "We, the people", or at least those of us who vote make the choices of those authorities. As Thomas Jefferson said, "We do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate." And from Plato, "One of the

 penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors."

If we are happy with those whom we have elected, we can re-elect them and keep them in authority. If we don't like their performances, we can fire them by electing somebody else to fill their seats.

Paul tells us, not WHO should be in authority, but that we should submit to that authority. In our country, that means that we are to follow the laws that our elected leaders have legislated. However, in a democracy, we also have the freedom to question our authorities, to tell them what we think, and to make suggestions if we think that would help them to do a better job. That is not only allowed in a democracy; it should be encouraged. Freedom to assemble, to gather in town halls, and freedom of speech, these liberties are enshrined in our Bill of Rights.

Admittedly, some of the laws that our government has given us may be unpleasant, even odious. A good example is our tax code. Who in the world enjoys paying taxes?! Yet, in Rom. 13:6 Paul gives us a strong admonishment to pay our taxes, saying "This is why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him. If you owe taxes, pay taxes, if revenue, then revenue, if respect, then respect, if honor, then honor."

Some of the laws our government has given us may seem pretty wacky. Did you know that in Freeport, Maine it's illegal to spit out of a second story window? (I guess that must mean that it's OK if you're spitting out of the first floor window) In Rumford, Maine, it's illegal to bite your landlord. In Wells, Maine it's illegal to place advertisements in cemeteries. {As if the people residing there are going to rise up out of their graves, read the ads, and start buying things that they don't really need, right?) Outside of Maine, laws can be even more bizarre. In San Francisco, it's illegal to wipe a car with used underwear. Well, I certainly hope that none of you has ever committed one of these grave, heinous infractions. I know I haven't.

You may sometimes feel that your voice isn't being heard, especially right now in the midst of the din and chaos of our current political scene, but you do HAVE a voice, and you have the freedom to assemble with others of like mind so that together, you can be heard. You can call or write to your elected officials, and here in Maine, town halls are a good way to express your views to candidates and legislators. This is part of the responsibility that goes along with the privilege of being a citizen in a democratic country such as ours.

But as Christians, we are not only citizens of our country, with the incumbent privileges and responsibilities thereof. We are also citizens of Heaven, something we may not think about as often. Phil. 3:20 "But OUR citizenship is in HEAVEN. And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ." So with respect to the coming election, do we have any responsibility as citizens of Heaven that may impact on our secular citizenship?

I believe that we do. The choices that we make as we vote should be God directed. I'm not going to tell you for whom I think you should vote. That's not my role, and, in fact, that would violate the ethic of separation of church and state. I'm not even going to tell you for whom I plan to vote unless in a personal conversation, certainly not from the pulpit. I will happily discuss politics with you from now until the cows come home, but will only discuss political ETHICS when in the pulpit and representing the church. I am, however, going to try to shed a little bit of Scriptural light on HOW, as Christians, we should consider making these decisions.

Ps. 119:10-11 David speaks to God saying "I seek You with all my heart. Do not let me stray form Your commands. I have hidden Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You."

We, as followers of God should always endeavor to live with God's word in our hearts. Knowing God's word, we should also choose candidates whose behavior and policies indicate that they adhere to godly principles. But how can we know who does and who does not?

Matthew 12:34 "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." If godly principles are truly in a candidates heart, then the words that she speaks will show love, compassion, and a concern for the people she will govern.

By this, I don't mean that in a diverse country like the US we should expect that everyone we elect will be a Christian. We are a country of not only Christians, but also Jews, Muslims, Buddists, secular humanists, Wiccans, and people of many other faiths. But we can use the guidelines Jesus has given us for kind, compassionate, caring behavior to assess the candidates.

After Judas' betrayal and Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, in the first chapter of Acts we find the remaining eleven disciples trying to choose a replacement for Judas. Acts 1:24 "Then they prayed." (That's always a good start) They prayed "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two You have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry."

If we follow the model the disciples have given us, we should be praying about our votes. We should pray that God will guide us to the right person...not the candidate, who, at first blush seems the most attractive, or the most clever, or who looks most like us, nor even the one whom we think is the most likely to strengthen the economy and make us wealthy. Perhaps we should instead ask God to guide us to the person that she knows is the her choice, even if, by worldly standards (ie. the economy) the candidate may not seem quite as strong.

As we vote, we must acknowledge that no matter how diligently we have tried to follow Biblical principles in choosing the best candidates, we have no guarantee that our chosen candidate will win the election. Regardless of whether or not our favorite candidates win, we have a responsibility to both submit to the governmental authority AND to speak out with our concerns and suggestions. It is our responsibility as citizens in a democracy to keep our leaders appraised of what we think.

As citizens of Heaven, we have a responsibility to pray for our leaders. We can pray that they will hear God's voice through whatever venue they accept, and

will abide by it as they shoulder the massive burdens of governing and as they make complex, difficult, and sometimes painful decisions on our behalf. We should be doing this routinely, even if we did not vote for these leaders, in which case they probably need our prayer more than ever!

What if our favorite candidates DO win their elections? We can rejoice that God has allowed them to win and thank him profusely. We as Christians, however, have an obligation to be gracious. NO GLOATING IS ALLOWED! We cannot be smug or rude to those who may have voted for the losing candidates. If we are blest to have voted for winners, we don't have the right to feel superior to those "across the aisle". These voters may be feeling sad and disappointed, even angered by the loss. As Christians, we are to be gracious regardless of whether our candidates have won or lost.

Yet, we must as followers of God speak out against even our fellow believers if we see wrong being done in God's name.

"Our patriotism does not require that we minimize our religious convictions; however, America's historic commitment to religious pluralism enables faith communities to live in civic harmony with one another without sacrificing our theological convictions. If one particular religious group attempts to commandeer our government and laws, we must stand up against it, especially when it inspires acts of violence and intimidation---includingvandalism, bomb threats, arson, hate crimes, and attacks on houses of worship against religious communities at home and abroad." I adapted that statement from a much longer one from the Christians Against Christian Nationalism Statement

In a time when people are slinging around terms like "liberal" and "conservative" as if they were dirty words, and even when we or our favorite candidates are being attacked by opponents, we need to take a step back and a deep breath. When we are feeling the most angry with what's happening in politics, when we feel the most frustrated, the most riled up, the most disgusted, please remember that, above all, and despite how much views contrary to our own are spouted venomously and may raise our hackles, we are, above all, called to love God, to love one another, and to love all people as children of God.

We must try to stop wrong behaviors and attitudes when we see and hear them being espoused, but must do so with love and respect for those whom we perceive as misguided. Otherwise, we have no hope of winning them over. We need to acknowledge that every person, regardless of his or her politics or even unethical behavior is still a child of God and thus should be treated with kindness and compassion.

As the church camp song goes:

"We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. And we know that our unity will one day be restored.

They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love."

I have to admit that in our current contentious, divisive environment, I personally find some of this Biblical advice difficult to follow. My first inclination is to be snarky when I discuss some of the politicians and their followers that I don't particularly care for; however, the wisdom embodied in that Biblical advice is obvious, so I feel compelled to give it my best shot.

We have a dual citizenship, one in heaven and one here in the United States. Although our citizenship in Heaven is always our highest priority, Scripture tells us that we are also called to be good earthly citizens as well.

It's not easy to be a good citizen of the United states, It takes time, effort, and a willingness to stay well-informed through a variety of sources. It needs us to get out, communicate with our legislators, and exercise our franchise.

Neither is it easy to be a good citizen of Heaven. It takes time, effort, and a willingness to stay well-informed through a variety of sources. It needs us to get down on our knees praying and indulge in the care and feeding of a close and

strong relationship with God. While being good citizens of Heaven must, of course, always be our highest priority, being good citizens of Heaven will certainly make us better citizens of the United States.

We must look at the USA, its laws and its leadership through the lens of our citizenship in heaven, its laws and its leadership. Barbara Brown Taylor, a gifted Episcopalian preacher, teacher, and writer, says "Our job is to stand with one foot on earth and one in Heaven with the double vision that is the gift of faith."

We need to fulfill the responsibilities of both of our citizenships if we hope to partake of the many blessings of each. If we do that, we may not find the walk easy, but we will find the rewards to be immeasurable.

AMEN