

Outline of Faith, Ethics, and Our Vocation as Citizens, by Darrell Jodock, September 16, 2020

Grace note: “Politics” is community decision-making and the process for doing so. It may or may not be partisan—that is, it may or may not involve political parties.

Introduction: When discerning our vocation as citizens--Step 1: Theological principles (see last time) provide the basis and framework for our vocation. Step 2: Ethical principles provide guidance. And guidelines drawn from wisdom help manage the rough spots. Step 3: We exercise our freedom as we make our decisions who and what to support and what we can do.

Part I: Ethical principles

1. Pay attention to those in need.
2. When deciding on a policy or a program, pay attention to those who will benefit and those who will be harmed (not party ideology).
3. Be guided by the goal of whole/healthy relationships. One way is by cultivating trust. Another is working with the people we are trying to help. Stand up for the excluded and the misunderstood.
4. Imagine an alternative community shaped by God’s goal. It may provide ideas for changes to be made in ours.
5. Seek common ground with other individuals and groups to get things done. “Common ground” involves overlapping ethical concerns=basis for cooperation. (“Middle ground” is something different—the result of compromise. Of course, middle ground can also be valuable--in legislation, arbitration, and elsewhere.)
6. Seek to enhance the common good. This means expanding our circle to listen to those in different, racial, ethnic, economic, and professional settings and working to benefit all, not just individuals or groups.
7. Give attention to the well-being of the earth. God created it and called us to steward it. Doing so is our moral responsibility.
8. Embody and encourage hope, so people can overcome despair and not be swept up in fear and blame.
9. Make use of our faith community as a place of discernment and support. That is, in a small group with shared values, explore and assess possible ways of behaving as a citizen, especially in specific situations. The same group can provide encouragement and support.

Part II: Guidelines drawn from wisdom

1. We need information in order to make good political decisions. We need to talk with those involved and ask questions. In particular it’s important to be clear about what’s causing the problem we’re trying to remedy. And we need to anticipate “unforeseen consequences.”
2. Recognize that local and state-wide decisions quite often affect our lives and the lives of our neighbors more directly than what is decided in Washington.
3. Recognize that politicians are cautious. We need to show support for a project in order for them to be able to endorse it. Appreciate and make use of the accessibility of politicians here in Minnesota.
4. When an idea has support, partisan disagreements often concern the best way to accomplish it. This can be a positive thing—a way of taking multiple factors and people into account. Unless the method harms someone, decisions about it are of little concern for our vocation as citizens.
5. Dissent plays an important role in our public life. It prompts us to need to make a decision about something we may have hitherto ignored.
6. We need to learn to talk about controversial topics in a productive way. The more we avoid talking, the more misunderstanding there will be, the more polarization there will be, and the more paralysis we’ll see. (Polarization is more than disagreeing; it’s considering the other party to be dangerous. Where there is trust, polarization disappears, but not disagreements. They can be valuable.) It’s easy to blame polarization on others, but the solution starts with us.
7. Beware of social media—much misinformation and unconstructive arguing. Also beware of talk shows designed to make people mad. They are not informing; they are agitating and contributing to polarization.

8. Be careful about appeals that claim the “right to” something. When competing positions each claim a “right to” something, there is no way forward. We need relational language instead, because the solutions involve the wellbeing of more than one person.
9. Watch out for words and phrases that function as code words for race. Anxiety about race lurks under quite a lot of political rhetoric today.
10. Be aware of the political consequences of increasing economic inequity. Those with wealth (including corporations) make large political contributions to influence the political process. They hire lobbyists that write bills for Congress in such a way as to advantage themselves. This undermines the democratic process. The rest of us have the numbers to outvote these over-influencers, but we need to be aware of what’s happening and then exercise our voting power. (The differential between the wealthy and others decreased from the 1930s to the 1970s. It has increased since 1979. From 1980 until the beginning of this year, the economy, when adjusted for inflation, grew by 79%. However, the bottom ½ of wage earners took home only 20% more, while the top .01% took home 420% more. Another way to measure: today the top 1% in the U.S. own 36% of the wealth.)
11. Try to develop a realistic view of the U.S. It offers some good things for which we need to be grateful, but using too many superlatives denies the experience of those who are hurting. The U.S. falls behind on many measures including infant mortality, overall health care, and the opportunity for advancement. We have come to the aid of other countries but our policies have also damaged other peoples. We will need to thread the needle very carefully in order to preserve what is good and reform what is not.

Part III More explanation about why alternative views do not fit the Lutheran tradition.

The First Amendment prohibits the establishment of any religion and guarantees the free exercise of religion. The latter guarantees us the right to practice our religion, including letting our religious and ethical principles influence our citizenship, so long as our exercise does not infringe on others. E.g. feeding the hungry does not infringe on others, but outlawing the teaching of evolution in public schools does.

The separation of church and state is about the separation of institutions.

1. Some say that religion should have nothing to do with politics. This may be a misunderstanding of the separation of church and state. Or it may misinterpret IRS guidelines prohibiting endorsement of candidates, thinking (wrongly) that they exclude the discussion of politics in church. It is true that the church has nothing to say about certain technical economic questions (of the Federal Reserve, say), but it does have something to say when people are being disadvantaged or harmed.
2. Some claim that there is a specific way Christians must vote. But this assumes the Bible provides such specific information, when (Lutherans say) it does not. And it shifts attention to the candidate or bill rather than the people affected. Luther objected to calling any political movement “Christian” because it always includes an element of self-interest. James Hunter identifies part of what Luther had in mind. Whenever a group or organization is formed to support a political proposal, it wants to expand its influence and take credit for “winning.” These are matters of self-interest. And when two organizations take opposite views, their own self-interest involves perpetuating the controversy. Finding common ground would mean the organizations would have no reason to exist.
3. Some claim Christianity should be given a privileged position in U.S. politics. This is a carry-over from Christendom and is usually based on the claim that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation. This is simply incorrect. At the time of the Revolution, only 15% belonged to a church of any kind. And the first five presidents and virtually all the founding fathers were Deists. They denied the divinity of Christ, rejected miracles, and denied any authority to the Bible except for its moral teachings.

The alternative, based on Luther, is that the theological principles that grow out of our faith provide the framework (the basis and the goal) for our vocation as citizens. Ethical guidelines and guidelines drawn from wisdom provide more specific assistance, and then in our freedom we take all of this and use it as the basis for deciding what to do—that is, how (in the political sphere) to express our love for the neighbor and the community. To assist us, the church can provide a community of discernment and support.