

Politicians' Favoritism Rejects Democracy's Ideal

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Posted: Wednesday, September 16, 2009

I was a little concerned that the 24 Lutherans in the U.S. Congress (four in the Senate and 20 in the House; 15 Democrats and nine Republicans) wouldn't get the message when they attend church this coming Sunday.

That's because, remembering how Luther questioned the "gospel-ness" of the Letter of James, there might be the possibility that Lutherans would refrain from using the "straw" epistle in their lectionary cycle.

But it turns out I have nothing to fear.

I learned from old friend and colleague, Martin E. Marty, that, for Lutherans, "James has been in our lections before we had lectionaries."

So maybe I should be more concerned about Baptists, my own denominational family, especially those who attend churches where preachers don't use the lectionary and, therefore, most likely will miss the terribly relevant lesson from the second chapter of James.

(By the way, there are 64 Baptists in Congress. Eight are in the Senate with only one Democrat among them, and 58 are in the House, evenly split among Republicans and Democrats.)

My co-Baptists in Congress would be faced with a challenging question right off the bat:

My sisters and brothers, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

OK, that may not appear, at first glance, to be an appropriate question for any elected official in a democracy that honors the separation of church and state. But when the author elaborates on the question, it becomes relevant both religiously and politically:

If a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes comes in, and you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there" or "Sit under my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Religiously it's important, of course, because, as James explains, by showing favoritism to the wealthy and dising poor persons, the Christian would be honoring those who are

the oppressors of others and dishonoring the very persons God has chosen to favor with a richness of faith that makes them heirs of God's promised dominion.

In short, if by your actions you contradict what God has so centrally revealed to all of us, then you obviously "don't really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ."

Something very similar operates politically. If you favor those with wealth – for example, those who provide you with large campaign contributions in order to influence your political decisions on matters like health care reform, tax policy or environmental issues – and pay only lip service to those who can't make even medium-size campaign contributions, or can't afford health insurance, or suffer from degraded soil, air and water, then you've violated the very foundation of our democratic polity, something as fundamental as the principle of the equality of all people.

In short, to paraphrase James, if by your actions in your vocation as a politician, you contradict what all of us understand to be so central to our democracy, then you obviously really don't believe in this glorious experiment of government by "we the people."

James tells his readers that they will do well if they, in their actions, "fulfill the royal law according to the Scriptures, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

But then he warns: "If you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

Something like that counsel surely applies politically to our senators and representatives, whether they be Lutherans, Baptists or one of the "other" categories of faith and non-faith: You will do well if, in your actions, you fulfill the self-evident truth that all of us are created equal – that favoritism is a sin, a transgression against the abiding law that binds us together as a nation.

Wherever they are religiously or politically, they need to get the message.