Mark 12:13—17

Matthew 25:32—36

**“HOW MY MIND HAS CHANGED ABOUT…”**

**5. POLITICAL POINTS OF VIEW**

This morning's sermon is the 5th in the series “How My Mind Has Changed About...” and the topic is Political Points of View.

I am grateful to the writer who, in response to my invitation, sent the following:

I grew up in a home where politics was a topic of interest. My father had little formal education, but due to being a young man during the depression, he made his way in life by working hard to survive. He and my uncle worked to help support their family while they should have been in school.

Later he joined the Army and served overseas in Great Britain, North Africa, Italy, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. When he returned from service he purchased his first farm.

The Liberal party of Canada was his choice as being the political party of the ordinary guy. The Progressive Conservatives were, in his view, the party of the wealthy and out of touch with the same ordinary guy. The CCF and later NDP were seen by him as next thing to Communists, and wanted what little money we had to give to their supporters that didn't want to work to support themselves.

My father and I would discuss the worldly things that he had seen in his travels of the world. His opinion of the USA was that they were full of themselves because of their wealth, and they assumed a lot more credit for the advances during the war than their efforts deserved. He also saw that the Americans were much more aligned with conservatism than with any social justice in society.

I followed his thinking for some years until the flag debate, when our views diverged. His was that the flag he fought under was good enough for Canada. I felt that while Canada was approaching 100 years of age, we still didn't have our own flag, while every two bit dictatorship had their own flag within minutes of assuming power. It was Lester Pearson, the fine liberal, who was Prime Minister during this debate. John Diefenbaker, his opponent in the debate, was the Leader of the Opposition, the Progressive Conservatives.

My liberalism was inspired by the leadership of Pierre Trudeau. He was appealing to an idealistic young man. His sense of irreverence made the over-thirty crowd uncomfortable which was in line with my thinking at the time. Pierre Trudeau's intellect fascinated me while sometimes confusing me at the same time. My father was losing his enthusiasm for liberalism as I was gaining mine. The repatriating of the Constitution was another disagreement.

The Constitution and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms were things with which I could very much agree, but soon groups of people started forming what are now called “Special Interest” groups, and starting using the Human Rights and Constitution to complain about the very life we have been privileged to enjoy. These groups have led to censoring our everyday language, expanding some limits of speech that have been generally acceptable, such as public use of the “N” word and other hateful language, but also adding who might use that word and others.

The expansion of workplace prohibitions of discrimination in hiring based on sex, race, colour of your skin, religion, sexual preference to allowing employees who are using those rights to keep their jobs has been, in my view, have been at times unsuitable and even toxic to the workplace.

Some more examples of this strange behaviour are kindergarten children being chastened for hugging each other as examples of sexual harassment. Another is of a father being arrested and jailed for a short time, because his daughter drew a picture of a gun in her school class.

I have heard discussions by people, both in the Church and community where some very logical opinions are dismissed as not having any credibility because the people have no education in the topic being discussed. The effect on our everyday living is that it undermines an “ordinary person” as having a valid or learned opinion.

At the same time, I have become annoyed by the constant battering of Stephen Harper by the Liberals in our country. He is, after all, our Prime Minister.

All of these things in recent years have caused my thinking to lean away from Liberal ideas and back to more Conservative ones, and with that I have become comfortable.

Those are the writer's remarks about political points of view. So, for the next few minutes, let's think about politics. And by the way, I will never try and tell you what you should think. I never have done that and won't start now. What I will do is tell you what I think and why, based on my understanding of life, and how the Christian gospel intersects with life, and then invite you to think for yourself.

So to political views. Most folks I know have political views. Some of those views have changed over the years, as our writer's have; others have remained constant, and they could never see themselves voting any way other than...well, take your pick.

I'm not sure but I may have told you before a story about my Uncle Harold. The sitting federal Liberal Member of Parliament in Essex South riding, near Windsor, was retiring and Uncle Harold was being courted to take the Liberal nomination. One day he met his brother-in-law Jim on the street in Leamington. Jim, a staunch Conservative, said, “Harold, I know that if you take the nomination, you will likely get elected. And I know that when you get elected you will do a great job for the people of this riding. But I need to tell you, Harold, that when I get in that ballot box...well, my hand will shake so bad...I just can't vote Liberal.”

One thing this morning's writer put the finger on is that it can take quite a while for one's mind to change. Some, as in the case of Jim that I just cited, never do. Jim was one of those guys who, on the day he was born in the hospital, he was hard-wired Conservative. And he remained that way all his life.

Some of you here, I suspect, will remember that delightful stage play and movie *South Pacific*. In that was a song called “You've Got To Be Carefully Taught.”

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,

You've got to be taught from year to year,

It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid

Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade,
You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught before it's too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!

No parent actually teaches infants how to move their feet and begin to walk...or how to shape their tongues in order to begin to speak. Children don't generally take classes to learn how to play together, or how to fall in love, or how peer pressure works. They just soak it up unconsciously. They watch, they listen, they learn...and follow much of what they pick up from their parents.

In a similar vein, attitudes about other people, about authority, about the roles of men and women seem to settle into the soul like gold dust settled into bedrock. Same, oftentimes, with political views. They're learned in the parental home.

Of course, those attitudes and views can be un-taught...or unlearned if you will. Mostly we do that because of experience, or new insights, or whatever. But it's a process. And not always an easy process to go through, because it means unlearning what we thought before.

Now, I may not agree with your political views, but I will defend, no matter what your right to hold those views. That's democracy. And we should be able to hold differing views without malice.

The problem...as I see it anyway...is that that “without malice” part doesn't seem to hold among politicians any more. Maybe it has been ever thus, I don't know, but it occurs to me it's getting worse. Doesn't matter who it is, or what party it is, just as soon as someone from one of the other parties says something there's an immediate attack. They've always called politics a “blood sport” but it seems to me it's getting more bloody.

I covet the day, or even the possibility of the day, when our elected representatives work together for the good of the country as a whole. I'm not sure what it would take to bring that about, but it certainly would be for the better were it to happen. In the meantime, it's quite discouraging.

To insert just a touch of levity...or at least satire...into a pretty serious subject, Mark Twain once said that “It's easier to fool people than to convince them that they have been fooled.” A friend of mine recently likened political pronouncements to what magicians and sleight-of-hand artists. They invite us to *look over here in this hand* in order that we don't see *what's happening over there in the other hand*.

You will decide to what extent that is true. That's a fairly cynical assessment. But I do detect a fair bit of cynicism afoot in our country just now. Is that one of the things that has contributed to low voter turnout in recent years?

In our province of Ontario the voter turnout at the last election, in 2011, was a record low of 49.2%.

From 2000 to now, there have been 5 federal elections. The voter turnout has ranged from a high of 64% to a low of 58%, with an average over those years of 61%. The average turnout among those in the 18 to 24 age group was even lower.

What it means is that, in our multi-party system, a party only needs to win slightly over 1/3 of those who vote to vote in order to form a majority government. But just take that one step further. If only 60% of people vote, and you only need to get a little over 1/3 of those who vote, you will win a majority by gaining slightly over 20% of the total electorate.

Here's the problem: Being able to vote is one of the greatest freedoms we have. And yet, not nearly enough of us are exercising that freedom. Whatever the reasons, the impact is quite troubling.

On one level, I don't understand it. On another level, I do. So here's a confession. During the latter days of the Chretien Liberal government I had become so disillusioned with politics that I determined not to vote in the next election. My vote wasn't going to make any difference so why bother?

Fortunately, my conscience got to me. My conscience walks around our house all the time. Looks and sounds a whole lot like Janice. So my conscience convinced me that it was wrong not to vote, because voting is such a sacred privilege, so I voted. But I must tell you, I am dangerously close to that same mindset again now.

Please hear this clearly. I am not advocating that people not vote. For I believe it is important. And come next election, I will most likely do so. What I am expressing is my discouragement.

Where are the big ideas? Where are the policies and programs that take into consideration the needs of all our citizens, not just some?

In the United States, venture capitalist Tom Perkins recently offered the view that only taxpayers should have the right to vote, and you should get a number of votes equivalent to the dollars you pay in taxes. Pay a million dollars in taxes, you get a million votes.

That word *taxpayer* is a word that I have come to badly dislike. Whenever I hear it, I have a sense that I am being used. It's as if the only people who matter are those who pay taxes. We're more than taxpayers, we're citizens. We are all citizens, no matter who we are, from the greatest to the least, from the poorest among us to the richest.

One of these days, I hope we all, including our leaders, will remember that we're all in this game of life together. Several great thinkers across the ages have said that any society is measured by how it treats the weakest members among it. The influential 18th century German thinker Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote, “Compassion is the basis of morality.”

But long before that, some folks came to Jesus one day and, in order to trap him into treason, asked him whether or not they should pay their taxes. Jesus said, “Show me a denarius—a Roman coin.” They did. He said, “Whose likeness is on the coin?” They answered, “Why, it's Caesar.” So he said, “Right you are. Therefore give to Caesar all that belongs to him, and to God all that belongs to God.”

But the question left is: What belongs to God? So Jesus told this parable. It's called the Parable of the Great Judgment. He asked his listeners to envision all the nations of the world gathered around a king's throne. And something like a court, with a judge takes place. In that process the judge separates them into two groups: the sheep on the right and the goats at the left. And the judge will say to the sheep:

“Come and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then, the parable says, the righteous will ask... Hold on, what did it say...the righteous will ask? The righteous? Those who are morally astute, those who are virtuous beyond reproach, will ask? They will ask:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And the judge will answer them,

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those among you, you did it to me.”

I wonder. I wonder how different our world might be if it reflected those values? I wonder how different our politics might be if we all sought together to reflect those values?

So I invite us to consider...irrespective of our differing political views...how the Christian gospel impacts upon our views, and how those views reflect the gospel?