

“Whoever is not against us: making sense of our place in today’s issues.”

Pentecost XVII/Proper 21

If you have not heard the Episcopal Church is involved in some divisive social issues. Defeating the death penalty in Wisconsin and the ban on legalizing civil unions are among the two big social issues facing voters in November. Each of us has a right to vote his/her conscience on these matters. Each of us including your pastor has concerns and beliefs on these matters. I pledge, I will never influence you to vote or seek otherwise. And yet, it would be irresponsible not to take the lead in educating you from our Adult Forum if not from the pulpit.

An informed Christian makes for a better citizen and in turn makes for a better Christian. I do believe it is my job to make sure you do not bury your heads in the sand in thinking that public policy will not influence the way we live and believe. It has and it will influence us. Faith and society does intersect. We know all too well how radical fundamentalist beliefs affect our country, our travel, and how we live with neighbors who are different in race, religion and relationships.

We are not without guidance from Holy Scripture. We have been given a general principle where we can decide what to support as citizens and people of God. Jesus said to his disciples: “Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Knowing what Jesus stood for will help us make decisions in the arena of public policy. The first thing we should note is the teaching that the body of Christ must take care of how it treats its members. How crucial this is! The words of Jesus warn us it would be better to separate oneself from the church if a stumbling block (camping brick) were put up in the path of a believer causing them to fall.

A “stumbling block” is from the Greek word **skandalon** skan'-dal-on: a trap-stick (bent sapling), i.e. a snare that (figuratively, cause of displeasure or sin) – gives an occasion to fall (of stumbling), offence, thing that offends, stumbling block. Our modern use of the word is simply called a “scandal.” Trapping someone with words of accusation, ambushing a person’s character, tearing down a believer’s faith, all suggests “hunting” and “killing.”

In this gospel a series of statements (not to be taken literally) warn Christians to remove the offence that leads us to trap a brother or sister Christian.

Jesus became sick to tears when people caused other people to stumble. Some of his harshest statements in the gospels are reserved for those people including his disciples. Jesus uses exaggerated actions to make his disciples face the gravity of what they have done. By rebuking the unknown man who offered healing and exorcism in Jesus' name, the disciples had tried to impede and block his power and compassion from flowing to those in need. In response, Jesus offers his disciples some of his harshest, most demanding judgments on what believers should do in order to avoid committing such sins.

So great is Jesus' love for these "little ones," the powerless, the weak, the children, the outcasts, that he applies the ancient teaching of "pars pro toto," the part for the whole in a new way. The concept applied to "a situation involving a threat to life." The ancient teaching would have been compared to the mountain climber who years ago decided to cut off his trapped foot to save his life from exposure to cold.

Research into the biological origins of faith tells us of this device used by many animals of sacrificing a part of themselves in order to escape from danger. Some spiders, lizards and birds have body parts that break off to distract predators while the prey finds safety. (see *The Biological Roots of Religion: Is Faith in Our Genes?* by Morton Hunt, *Free Inquiry Magazine*, *Volume 19, Number 3*).

The irony is that we want to protect ourselves and think that by cutting out the "little ones" as Jesus calls them, the outcasts, the children, the weak, the powerless, that we can feel safe and save ourselves.

However, Jesus uses this principle in a different way. Jesus is the first to talk about "pars pro toto" in the context of saving others, not oneself. In unprecedented fashion, Jesus recommended the pain and humiliation of permanent maiming as a positive alternative, not for the sake of self-survival, but for the protection and preservation of the "little ones." Rather than the "part for the whole" for self

preservation Jesus uses it to teach sacrifice for the good of others. Rather than block his mercy and power to heal people Jesus says to John and the disciples its better for one to remove yourself or that part that takes away from serving those who have no voice. This concept has been practiced by religious orders, priests and nuns for thousands of years who forsake their right to marriage, parenthood and family.

Jesus did not try to curb his tongue when castigating those who took unfair advantage or practiced outright abuse against the "little ones" of the world. Neither did Jesus prevent those who were outside the flock, from preaching, teaching and healing in his name.

I urge you, fellow Christians to educate yourselves on matters of faith and public policy. These matters cut across political boundaries. We are obligated to act with justice, mercy and humility as the people of God and encourage others to do so. Visit websites such as [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org) or [www.episcopalchurch.org](http://www.episcopalchurch.org) and read the articles on social issues. Jesus taught, "Whoever is not against us is for us." May we support those who are for us, the church, and may the church support those who are the "little ones" of this world. Amen.