"Faith in Democracy"

Jeremiah 29:4-13; Matthew 5:13-16, 43-48; Galatians 5:1 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might renew our commitment to living out your hopes for our world. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

When you see that the preacher has titled the sermon "Faith in Democracy," you could easily get the wrong idea. So let me be clear: as Christians, we place our faith in God, not in any human process or structure. When I say "Faith in Democracy," what I'm getting at is how we practice our faith within a democratic system, one that accords us a certain amount of agency over our own lives and how our society is arranged. We can be sure that when Paul wrote "For freedom Christ has set us free," he didn't have any conception of the liberty that could exist when leaders are elected and each person holds the right to have their say. My hope today is that we can conduct ourselves in such a way that he wouldn't be ashamed of us for not taking full advantage of the privileges we have that he would find astonishing.

Despite the fact that our scriptures were written long before most cultures were practicing anything resembling the representative democracy we strive to maintain in the 2026 United States, there are lessons here for us, as we navigate how to be faithful in the face of the many challenges that face our society. To live out our Christian faith in a religiously diverse democracy does not mean trying to make other people

follow Jesus the way we follow Jesus. It does not entail trying to enforce our Christian standards and traditions on anyone else. It does not involve privileging Christians and Christian concerns over others. Those are the trappings of religious nationalism, and they have nothing to do with the faith of Christ Jesus. Our faith is about what we do and how we care for our neighbors; it is not about trying to make our neighbors just like us.

The most important lesson our faith can offer us, as citizens of a country facing innumerable challenges, is wisdom about how to avoid being trapped by the Triplet Temptations. There are many things that can keep us from getting involved in our communities the way we should, but these three are the ones our faith tells us to watch out for. The Triplet Temptations are apathy, cynicism, and despair. Any one of these or any combination of the three can keep us from doing what we are called to do, as good neighbors and faithful followers of Christ.

Apathy is what happens when we assume that "politics" is something other people do. What we think of as politics can seem too complicated or too conflict-ridden, so we turn away, hoping someone else will handle it. Because it feels hard, we avoid it, and next thing you know, we've forgotten how directly those decisions we've given over to others impact our own lives. But when Jesus told us to "light our light shine before others," he didn't say, "if there isn't enough light in the room," or "if nobody else will." From the perspective of faith, voting and other ways of getting

involved in how our communities are shaped are not about what other people are doing or have done; these actions are about how each of us is choosing to use our own power to impact the world in ways that mirror God's desire for humanity. You using your voice isn't about whether the song is already loud enough; it's about you using your voice, making your mark, living out your faith. Jesus may not have known what democracy was, but he did know that being faithful involves living in such a way that we're doing our best to promote the flourishing of all creation, and I'm pretty positive that if he knew voting was an option, he would consider that part of it. Apathy is a sin of refusal, a rejection of the call that following Jesus places upon our lives. Nobody is saying that we can't take breaks and find rest when needed, but deciding that someone else is handling things altogether or that what we do wouldn't make a difference is not what faithfulness looks like.

When apathy finds purchase in our souls for long enough, it starts to fester into something more damaging – cynicism. Cynicism is what happens when we start trying to justify our lack of participation with excuses that sound savvy or superior. If we say we can't be bothered to vote because "all politicians lie" or "they're all crooks," we have given way to cynicism, a distinctly sharp-edged laziness that is corrosive to our souls and our common humanity. You can hear, in the verses we read from Jeremiah, that conniving leaders who lie have been around for centuries: "Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not

listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD." But the proper response to Jeremiah's warning is not to assume that all prophets are liars. Did those duplicitous diviners accuse Jeremiah of lying too? Quite possibly. But that doesn't give us an excuse to dismiss them all as useless; rather, it is a call to use our powers of discernment and critical thinking to determine which leaders are honoring the truth most reliably and which ones are practicing deceit. Sometimes it's as easy as comparing what a politician says with the evidence right in front of our eyes, at the grocery store, at our children's schools, or in the streets of our neighborhoods. But it often does require more effort, which is why people band together to promote common values, learn from experts in various fields, and share wisdom we've gained from various trusted sources. This fall's California ballot is two pages, double-sided. You don't have to be an expert on every issue to make a decision about each proposition. Cynicism tries to trap us in assuming that all the information that's offered about these questions is biased propaganda. But faithfulness asks us to listen more carefully, to question motivations with courage, and to be "wise as foxes," as Jesus put it. The truth is in there somewhere; it's probably messier than a Yes or No question, but as many a meme has reminded us, voting is a bus, not a taxi – the point is to get closer to where we want to go, not to wait for the perfect direct ride. Cynicism lets us pretend that because no given candidate is everything we want, it's

best to just sit this one out. But when we indulge in that sort of rationalization, people's lives are harmed. Faithfulness asks us to get involved, even when it's messy and imperfect. Faithfulness asks us to put in the effort of sussing out our least harmful options, of figuring out which flyers are the closest to telling the truth, of deciding whom we will trust and whom we will not and whom we will take a chance on. Cynicism may feel like a satisfying easy out, but it corrodes our souls and alienates us from our neighbors. It's a trap that's easy to fall into. When we hear Jesus ask us to pray for our enemies, we need to remember that sometimes we're our own worst enemies, and we need to pray about that too.

Finally, the third triplet in this triangle of temptation is despair. It would be understandable to look around at the challenges facing us at this moment in history and just give up. Is there a realistic democratic solution to our problems, if we understand democracy to mean listening to everyone's perspective and finding a way forward together? From many angles, it seems unlikely. But the biblical witness invites us to back up and see our situation through a wider lens. We may be in a tricky spot, but we still live in a country that guarantees our right to vote and participate in the decisions that affect us. Things may look bleak, but we're not in exile, living under a foreign nation's rule, for seventy-some years, like the Israelites Jeremiah was trying to reassure. The answer to despair is not a superficial platitude that "everything will be okay"; that, too, is theological laziness. What Jeremiah says instead is that there will be

an end to this difficult chapter, even if it is in the distant future, and that, more importantly, God is with us in the meantime. As people of faith, we are always waiting on God, putting our faith in God. But we are not waiting passively. Waiting does not mean doing nothing. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you… for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Or as modern-day prophets have put it: we all do better when we all do better. There are so many ways we can make a positive difference, and many of those levels are reflected up and down your ballot this fall. Dropping that envelope in the box may feel like pouring a teaspoon of water on a wildfire, but faithfulness asks it of you. Despair is not a luxury we can afford, just as those exiled Israelites couldn't. We know that the ends are not in our hands, but there is plenty we can do in the meantime.

If you haven't voted yet, it's time to get your plan together. Here are three steps I recommend: The first question is when. Schedule your voting; put it on your calendar, not just your to-do list, because that's how you make sure it happens. Set aside at least an hour, because that ballot is a long one! Take a moment to give thanks that you got it in the mail and can examine it at leisure in the comfort of your own home, rather than trying to get through it all at once in a voting booth! The second question is how. How will you determine who and what you're going to vote for? What are the trusted sources you will turn to for guidance? Who do you know that knows about judges, or tax structures, or schools? How will you get in touch?

The third question is where. Where is your closest drop box? Or if you want to take it to a polling place, which one is most convenient for you? Early voting locations opened yesterday, but for now, they're only open till 5 PM. Your closest drop boxes are listed in the information that came with your ballot, so you should be able to find those pretty easily.

Here's a bonus question: What day are your going to wear your sticker? But this is really about letting your light shine a little brighter, because it's also a question about who else you can encourage to get their ballot in on time. We're in the final ten-day stretch, and there may be people in your life who need a little nudge. Wearing that sticker is one way to start the conversation. Posting a picture of your ballot envelope going in the box is another. But you can also just ask. Let that light shine!

Finally, as we strive to follow Jesus faithfully in a participatory democracy, we need to recognize the ways in which our faith helps us see beyond these imperfect practices and compromises. Things may get even more complicated and frightening after the election. But the future will still be in God's hands. Our call to faithfulness will not change. We will still be invited to love our neighbors as best we can, with every means at our disposal, and yes, even to keep praying for our enemies. We will still be asked to shine our light before others, so that hope and mercy and compassion will not sputter out and die. May we answer the call with faithfulness and courage. Hallelujah and Amen.