Multiparty Democracy

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March 5, 2023

Texts:

Isaiah 58:6-9  
 Matthew 25:34-40

I’d like to share with you this morning about our new Electoral Change mission group, which is working to move our country toward multiparty democracy. I’d like to tell you what that means and why we’re committed to it.

As I was working on this teaching, Marja asked whether I was going to justify using this spiritual space of the Sunday teaching to talk about something overtly political. To be honest, I was a bit annoyed at her question, with the implication that unless I was talking about the inner life, I needed to justify myself. But she probably isn’t the only one here with that question.

In Isaiah 58, the prophet has God ask what kind of spiritual discipline God requires: The answer minces no words: the “fast” is to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free. In Matthew 25, Jesus says there is only one practice that will save us spiritually: Did we give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, medical care to the sick? That’s what our spiritual practice is to bring us to. Our inner life is to result in justice for the oppressed and the expression of universal love.

There is no form of government that guarantees justice for the oppressed and universal love. But I would like to suggest that a liberal democracy has the best chance of doing so. We might like the idea of a benign philosopher-king making benign dictatorial decisions for the benefit of everyone, but the actual, real-life history of rulers with dictatorial powers is not great.

By definition, a democracy is simply a society ruled by the majority. However, majority-rule does *not* guarantee a just order, either; in fact, an unsophisticated democracy is pretty dangerous: Think *Lord of the Flies*. Rather a democracy must guarantee protections for the rule of law, safeguard minority rights, protect individual freedoms of speech and religion, and so on. This is what the Bill of Rights guarantees, a so-called “liberal democracy.”

I want to suggest this morning that supporting such a democracy is a deeply spiritual task, a Christian responsibility.

**Let me give you the historical context for where we are politically.**

The problem is that for the last thirty-five years, United States democracy has not functioned well. People under the age of fifty can’t remember our democracy working well. America’s two-party politics has degenerated into a toxic hyperpartisanship that is deeply dysfunctional. Members of the two parties too often see each other as enemies to be destroyed rather than as legitimate political opponents to work with. And during these years of toxic hyperpartisanship, our democracy has failed: specifically, it has failed to set the oppressed free or care for the poor. We have failed to do the one thing that should matter to us as Christians.

The problem is that the two parties have sorted themselves so completely that there is no ideological overlap. Political scientists know from studying democracies around the world that two hyper-sorted parties *inevitably* develop this toxic hyperpartisanship. What has happened to our politics, in other words, is inevitable in a two-party system like ours. Political scientist Lee Drutman writes in *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop.*

Once the parties polarize in a two-party system, polarization becomes a self-reinforcing dynamic. And the more parties take strongly opposing positions, the more different they appear. The more different the parties appear, the more the other party comes to feel like a genuine “threat,” demanding vigilance in response. The more extreme the other party seems, the greater the need to defeat it. The more extreme the other party, the more vindicated your side feels in taking strong, even radical, action in response. Both sides fall into their own separate worlds of facts, full of reinforcing us-versus-them narratives. The more totalizing partisanship becomes the more totalizing it grows. (Drutman p. 27)

It hasn’t always been so. For most of our history, the United States has had a two-party system, but during most of that time, the national parties were amorphous big tents. Specifically, during the post-World War II period until the mid-1980s, there were actually two distinct groups within each party. The Democrats comprised Southern conservatives and New Deal liberals. The Republicans comprised New England liberals and Western populist/conservatives. None of these four groups constituted a majority in Congress so they had to reach across group identities to get anything done. This week’s opponents on one set of issues might be next week’s partners on another set of issues, so lines of communication had to stay open. In fact, we had a multiparty democracy. That period is well known as an era of efficient government with the “four parties” working together for the benefit of the entire country.

Well, *almost* the entire country. This big-tent politics was possible only because both parties agreed to ignore racial issues and allow Southern Democrats to perpetuate Jim Crow in the South and desperate segregation in the North.

Famously the Civil and Voting Rights legislation of 1964 and ‘65 required the liberals from the Republican Party to team with the New Deal Democrats for passage. And it was those bills that killed the Big Tent politics that made functional government possible. Afterwards, the Republicans went after the conservative South and eventually targeted Northern working-class whites. Conservative Democrats became Republicans. The process was complicated, but by 2010 there was simply no overlap in the parties at all. The most conservative Democrat was more liberal than the most liberal Republican and vice-versa.

I will be honest with you that I have primarily blamed the Republicans for this toxic partisanship and not-so-secretly hoped that Donald Trump would destroy the Republican Party. But that’s a naïve attitude on my part. For one thing, historically the Democrats have done their share to create this hyperpartisanship. But more importantly, as a country, we are divided pretty much 50-50, electorally. As much as I might like otherwise, the Republican Party is not going away. *More* likely is increasing polarization, political violence, and authoritarian take-over.

**Now let’s talk about a possible solution**. It may seem counter-intuitive, but the only possible solution I see is not to destroy the Republican Party but to change the electoral system to encourage the development of multiple parties. With four or five or six or seven major parties, no single party would have a shot at becoming a majority on its own. The multiple parties would have to work together to form coalitions in order to govern.

What might those parties be? Well, there might be a Green Party focused on climate and the environment; there might be a classic Republican Party of small government and low taxation; a traditional Democratic Party concentrating on liberal social values. There would certainly be a Christian nationalist party; a Libertarian Party; a Working Families Party, maybe a Black-Lives-Matter party.

**The thing is, the United States with only two parties is the real outlier internationally**. Most other democracies have between three and ten parties with five or six being the average. Multiparty democracy is certainly not a panacea for all political problems, but multiple parties do tend to solve the problem of toxic hyperpartisanship. Political scientists have discovered that:

Multiparty democracies have consistently generated stable, moderate, compromise-oriented policymaking; higher voter turnout; more satisfied citizens; and better representation of political and ethnic minorities. In multiparty democracies, parties do not claim to represent true majorities. They promise to represent and bargain on behalf of the different voters and issues they represent. In multiparty democracies, coalitions are more fluid and flexible, built around compromise. (Drutman p. 3)

**What is it about our electoral system that prevents the development of multiple smaller parties?** Political scientists now know that whenever you have single-member electoral districts, people won’t vote for a third party for fear of wasting their vote.

What’s a “single-member district”? It means that one elected representative is chosen from each district. US Senate elections are single-member electoral districts by definition: one senator from one state is elected at a time. That is written into the Constitution, so we’re not going to be able to create multimember districts for senators anytime soon.

But as a first step, we could institute ranked-choice voting, giving people a chance to vote for a third party without fearing that their vote will be wasted. If their preferred candidate loses, their vote automatically goes to their second- or third-choice candidate. Ranked-choice voting would probably have given Al Gore the election in 2000. But ranked-choice voting also gives third parties a fighting chance for their candidate to win.

And ranked-choice voting is increasingly popular across the country. It makes sense to people, and there are currently several states and many municipalities and other jurisdictions using it (including Virginia). Ranked-choice voting is an important first step that our mission group will support.

But we’re probably not going to get to a true multiparty democracy until we develop multimember districts for the House of Representatives. By current US law, members of the House *must* be elected in single member districts. In most of those districts, a candidate doesn’t even need a majority but can win with a mere plurality (even as little as 30%). That is, just getting more than the next guy is enough, which—by the way—small, well-organized groups can manipulate to elect extremist candidates that the majority would not otherwise support.

What might multimember districts look like? Virginia now has eleven House districts with a single member each. Under a proposal now before Congress, the state would be divided into three districts, one with five members, two with three members each. In the five-member district, for instance, each voter would select one of the candidates and the five candidates with the highest vote totals would be elected. That means that members would be elected proportionately. Currently, single-member southern Virginia districts contain 40% Democrats, but those 40% never have a member in Congress representing them. In a 5-member proportional multimember district with 40% Democrats, two of the congresspeople would be Democrats, so most people would be able to elect someone who represented them. The same would be true for Republicans in big cities who now have no chance of electing their candidates in single-member districts.

Political scientists have discovered something *amazing* about multimember districts. While the first few elections might just yield proportionate representation of the pre-existing parties — which is good in itself since more people feel more represented — within a short period of time, the multimember districts lead almost automatically to multiple parties being represented. In a five-member district, you only need 17% of the vote to elect someone from your party, so the threshold becomes doable, even for smaller parties.

It turns out that we don’t need a constitutional amendment to require ranked-choice voting in all Senate and congressional elections or to change the electoral system for the House of Representatives into multimember districts. All we need is for Congress to pass a law by a simple majority vote. And the bill for that law has already been proposed. It’s called the Fair Representation Act and it was proposed by Northern Virginia’s Don Beyer. It already has eight co-sponsors.

**In our time of toxic hyperpartisanship, why will a multiparty democracy help?**

# First of all, if no one party has a majority, each party has to work with others in order to get legislation enacted. Opponents this week may be colleagues next week, so legislators can’t afford to antagonize one another as much. And the political science research is clear that that is exactly what happens in multiparty democracy. Politicians work together to a far greater degree. Much more gets done.

# Second, two parties are simply not enough for most people to find a party that represents them. With five or six or seven parties, I’m more likely to find a party that more closely represents my points of view. And to the extent that more of us have a party we can truly identify with, the more faith we’ll have in our government and in our country.

# Third, while it’s no guarantee, ranked-choice voting and multimember districts work against extremism. Political science research is clear: multiparty democracies are more moderate and have generally dealt better with the right-wing populist revolt of the last fifteen years.

The United States could choose to become a multiparty democracy. If we as Christians are not building structures that encourage people to cooperate, then we aren’t being faithful. A spiritual politics creates structures that encourage people to work for the good, not that push them into discord and divisiveness.

Amen