Pray and vote: Political sloth

by Garret Keizer in the June 14, 2003 issue

Even before the invasion of Iraq had begun, the cry went forth through and from the churches: Pray! Pray for the soldiers, pray for the civilians, pray for peace. So I preached, and so I did. I wonder, though, if God didn't answer our petitions with one of his own: Vote!

Polls indicate that something like 96 percent of Americans say that they believe in a supreme being. More than 70 percent say that they pray at least once a week. Yet less than half of the nation's registered voters participated in the last presidential election. Millions of others were not even registered. It follows that among those praying now are a fair number who didn't vote then, which strikes me as a bit like praying for employment without bothering to apply for a job.

A variety of reasons may explain why some Christians can be so prayerful for their country and so neglectful of its political maintenance. In some of us, a residual Gnosticism tends to denigrate politics as belonging exclusively to "the world, the flesh and the devil." Christians whose fastidiousness runs in different directions may believe that the separation of church and state ought to include a separation of the churchgoer from the state. Still others, reacting against the idea of America as God's favored nation, may be loath to acknowledge the very real favors it bestows—a sort of Manifest Destiny in reverse.

In most cases, however, I think that our poor civic performance comes down to something less ideological. We simply have better things to do. For instance, we have to say our prayers. We have to continue our "faith journeys." Like the priest and the Levite on the road from Jericho, we cannot take electoral responsibility for every Samaritan, Iraqi or U.S. infantryman who falls by the way.

I am not so indignant here as I am culpable. Of ten resolutions that I made on Ash Wednesday, for example, none has to do with citizenship. I wrote approximately 460 pieces of correspondence in 2002—212 related to my work as a writer, 75 penned to members of my church, the rest to family, friends and miscellaneous recipients. Not a one went to my senators or congressman.

I did somewhat better as a reader. I subscribe to a handful of magazines that run articles on politics and current affairs. But of the books I logged as read from cover to cover, not a one was on American history or public issues, and only several might be broadly classified as political, including an intensely personal book of essays and a novel set before I was born.

Yes, I did vote. I even went to a town meeting in the spring—or at least to the segment on the school budget. But for someone who has so much to say about so many subjects, who has the advantages of a college education and the flexibility that self-employment allows—not to mention some fairly strident views on several issues—mine was a decidedly apolitical year.

I began trying to repent of that this past Lent. I give part of the credit for my conversion to an essay that appeared in the April issue of *Harper's Magazine*. In "Cause for Dissent," Lewis Lapham writes, "The successful operation of a democracy relies on acts of government by no means easy to perform, and for the last twenty years we have been unwilling to do the work." Later he puts the matter more pointedly: "The Bush Administration owes its existence to our apathy and sloth"—one reason that I have been unable to regard the invasion of Iraq as "Bush's war," or to pray for peace without also praying for forgiveness. Nor am I often able to hear the call to national prayer without recalling the motto of Mother Jones: "Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living."

As a person who preaches nearly every Sunday, I am now confronting the challenge of trying to move citizenship closer to the catechism. This means more than preaching on peace and justice; it means preaching about the civic responsibility for maintaining peace and justice. It means preaching a stewardship that takes account not only of the parish bills, but also of the Bill of Rights.

One begins with the scriptures, of course. One also begins by pointing out that no one in either the Old or New Testament lived in a democratic republic. For those of us who do, "rendering unto Caesar" is not and can never be the same thing as allowing a president to behave like a Caesar. And therein lies a hint of glory. "Remember not the former things . . . Behold, I am doing a new thing," writes Isaiah. We are not being chauvinistic to remind ourselves that America once was and once again might be a new thing on God's earth.

We might also remember Esau, who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage (a Happy Meal and a wide-screen TV); the refusal of Naboth to sell his ancestral vineyard to powerful interests; and Amos's oracle against those who "lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches," who enjoy music, wine and cosmetics, "but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" (or in our case, by the ruin of republican principles with imperial policies).

Perhaps no text is more to the point than the parable of the talents, with its warning against those who think that in merely preserving a trust they have done their duty, and in its implicitly greater warning against those who would squander a trust entirely. The right of political self-determination is indeed a talent entrusted to our care, and prayer alone does not count as an exercise of faithful stewardship. Perhaps the most extreme form of taking the Lord's name in vain is to say "God bless America" without a disciplined willingness to bless it ourselves.