

Voting Is a Sacred Act

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, May 31, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 5:38-48](#)

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If you've been part of the worshipping community long enough, you know how I love the first part of today's gospel reading. To paraphrase Jesus: You've heard it said that the appropriate response to evil is retribution. An eye for an eye, so it's controlled retribution, not escalating retribution. But still, it is retribution. I say to you, you're making this too personal. Don't resist the evildoer. Resist the evil system. The system oppresses in at least three ways: socially, economically, and militarily. Use the system's norms and rules to reveal and resist its evil.

For someone to strike you on the right cheek, they have to backhand you. In the culture of Jesus' day, the left hand was the bathroom hand, so I wouldn't touch you with my left hand. For me to strike your right cheek using my right hand, have to backhand you. And that kind of a slap is an example of social oppression. Only a socially superior person would backhand a social inferior person. By turning your other cheek, you're not slapping back. By turning your other cheek, you're not getting retribution for the evil of that kind of oppression. You're telling the person who slapped you and anyone who witnesses it, that you are not an inferior, that you are equal.

A common peasant had two articles of clothing, an inner garment and an outer garment. If someone sues you for one of your articles of clothing, give both of them. Yes, you'll be naked, which might be embarrassing, but in Jesus' day and culture, it wasn't shameful. The person who makes you naked was the one who is shamed, and the people who see your nakedness who are shamed. Think about the shame that came upon Noah's son Ham when Ham found Noah passed out naked. Noah wasn't shamed by being passed out naked. Ham was shamed by seeing Noah's nakedness. Reveal the shame of an economic system that leaves people without shelter (for a very poor person, that outer garment might have been their shelter) or clothing.

There was one particular type of person who could force you to walk a mile: a Roman soldier. The rules said that a Roman soldier could force a civilian to carry their gear. But, to keep the Roman soldiers from "abusing" (emphasis on the air quotes) the civilians of the communities they occupied, a soldier wasn't allowed to make them carry the gear from more than a mile. So, if he makes you go one mile, go the extra mile. Get him in trouble.

Don't resist the individual who is doing the oppressing. Reveal the oppression, whatever type it is – social, economic, or physical. Resist the system of oppression without resorting to retribution.

I love this – in theory. The only problem is my anger gets in the way. Keep going in the reading, and it's as if Jesus reads my mind.

You have heard it said, “love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, your enemy *is* your neighbor. The one who lives inside the system and ends up oppressing you by cooperating with an oppressive system may be your enemy. They are still your neighbor. Love them. God loves them; you love them, too. It’s easy to love the people who love you. Love your neighbors – *all* your neighbors – even the ones who oppress you.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Perfect? Are you freakin’ kidding me, Jesus? Have you even met me? Have you seen how jealous I can get, or how angry I can get? Have you noticed how insatiable my ego can be and how, deep down, I’ve got plenty of insecurity?

And Jesus said, “Yeah, I’ve met you.” What Jesus is also saying here is that perfection (fullness or wholeness might be better translations) is found in love. “Perfection is found in relationship with those others who seek to harm us or [who] seek our help.”¹

This is a call to radical love. Jesus “understands how narrow our love can be, how expansive a shape our hatred can take. Jesus sees this in us but also notices something else. He sees how God’s love inhabits and transforms us. He sees how broken relationships are made whole as the Spirit moves among us. He sees that justice can reign whenever we love our neighbors, no matter who they are.”²

It keeps coming down to love, doesn’t it? It keeps coming down to love.

I finally got around to watching the Ken Burns series on *The American Revolution* this month. I recommend it as preparations for the 250th anniversary of 13 colonies declaring their independence from their king. Two things from the series stick with me: (1) The Revolution didn’t happen in a vacuum. (2) Some truly revolutionary ideas came out of it.

Dr. Heather Cox Richardson says, “the idea of American democracy emerged from the peculiar circumstances of thirteen of the eighteen British-governed colonies in North America in the years between 1763 and 1776. The desperate attempts of the British government to raise money to pay for the Seven Years’ War convinced a motley group of colonists that they could create a new nation based on an idea: that men were entitled to have a say in their government.”³

Over the course of those 13 years, the leaders of those 13 colonies came to agree on “self-evident” truths: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”⁴

That, right there, might be the most revolutionary idea of all of them: that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. Yes, just who was included in the phrase “all men” was pretty narrow, and just who had the right to give

¹ Eric D. Barreto, “How to be Perfect,” *Patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/onscripture/2014/02/how-to-be-perfect-matthew-538-48/> (posted 17 February 2014; accessed 25 May 2026).

² *Ibid.*

³ Heather Cox Richardson, *Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America*, Kindle Edition, p 171.

⁴ The Declaration of Independence.

consent to the government was pretty narrow. Still, the idea took root. And over the past 250 years, that narrowness has expanded – though not universally and not continually.

One way of looking at the Civil War is that it was a fight over just who should be included in “all men.” One side thought there should be a hierarchy, that some people meant to be the rulers of everyone else. So, the equality of “all men” was, according to this view, limited to these elites. The other side thought the phrase “all men are created equal” really mean “all people,” and we are inching our way to living out that idea?

One of the things that I think Ken Burns left out of his series is the impact of the Protestant Churches, and particularly the impact Congregational churches, had on this notion of governments deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Since 1621, the Puritans, and the Pilgrims that followed them, and the Congregationalist that they became had been practicing a form of democracy. And over the years, that form of democracy expanded to become one that included every member of the congregation. The 19th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, guaranteeing the right of women to vote, wasn’t ratified until 1920. Some Congregational congregations were counting the votes of women some 100 years earlier.

Which brings me (finally) to the main point I want to make in this sermon: that voting is a sacred act. Now, I know that not everyone agrees with me on this point. Just this past week, our Regional Minister, the Rev. LaTaunya Bynum wrote, “I do not think of voting as a spiritual practice, but it is aspirational and it is a responsibility of citizenship and an act of resistance to people and systems that believe that theirs is the only voice that is worth hearing and honoring. And it is a way of honoring the ancestors, and those still living who marched, protested, faced down threats, and died so that all of us can claim the promise of democracy.”⁵

I would say voting *is* a spiritual practice, that it *is* a sacred act. To start with, voting is an act of turning the other cheek in that casting a ballot is a way of proclaiming that my voice, my choice is just as important as yours or anyone else’s. And so, voting asks us to engage in self-examination, which I think of as a spiritual practice. “Voting asks you to get in touch with your authentic self and identify what is important to you. Voting connects you with your neighbors as you consider the programs and policies that affect all of [us]. And voting encourages you to consider the larger whole of which you are a part.”⁶

Voting invites us to practice compassion, to feel the suffering of others and to seek ways to support them. Voting invites us to practice gratitude as we consider the work of our governments and the people we elect. Voting invites us to practice kindness by considering how candidates and propositions will impact the most vulnerable in our society. Voting invites us to practice justice by electing people who will act justly. Voting invites us to practice hope, particularly the hope that the people we elect will help us build a more perfect union.

⁵ LaTaunya Bynum, in an email dated 28 May 2026.

⁶ Mary Ann Brussat, “Voting as a Spiritual Practice,” *Spirituality & Practice*, <https://dev.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features/view/28674/voting-as-a-spiritual-practice> (accessed 30 May 2026).

The one thing that I think would make voting a more sacred act for me is to create a ritual around it. I love mail in ballots, particularly in California. Our ballots can be so long and complicated that I need the time to fill it out at home. On the other hand, I miss the communal act of going to my polling place and feeding my ballot into the ballot box. I almost get that feeling by dropping my ballot in one of the county ballot drop boxes. I just want a little more ritual to it. Maybe meeting up with friends to cast our ballots together, or gathering at a coffee shop after we voted to celebrate democracy could become a ritual I'm seeking. I want some way to mark this act as sacred. I'll keep working on that.

And if any of you are wondering if your vote matters, let me tell you a story. I read this in an article written by Mary Ann Brussat, and she says she learned it from Anthony de Mello's book, *The Heart of the Enlightened*.

"An ancient King in India sentenced a man to death. The man begged that the sentence be rescinded, and added, 'If the King will be merciful and spare my life, I shall teach his horse to fly in a year's time.'

"'Done,' said the King. 'But if at the end of this period the horse cannot fly, you will be executed.'

"When his anxious family later asked the man how he planned to achieve this, he said, 'In the course of the year, the King may die. Or the horse may die. Or who knows, the horse may learn to fly!'"⁷

We don't know what the outcome of an election will be until the ballots are counted. Who knows? The horse may learn to fly.

And even if the outcome of an election is drastically lopsided, I would say that if you let your voting be a sacred act, if you cast your vote as demand for equality, if you cast your vote as resistance to systems that oppress, if you cast your vote as an act of compassion, gratitude, kindness, or hope, then it made a difference – in you.

Decisions are made by the people who show up. Show up.

Amen.

⁷ *Ibid.*