
Mixed Motives and Storms: Politics and the Common Good

An article from the Cathedral Times
by Dean Sam Candler

This past Monday morning, as Atlanta waited for the wild windy remnants of Hurricane Irma to careen through our tree-canopied city, I was at church. Like you, perhaps, I was listening to weather reports, but I was also tending to necessary church preparations and work. The city seemed fairly still, a sort of in-between time. One might have even called it the calm before the storm! It was a mixed morning.

But, on Monday, I got a phone call having nothing to do with any of the hurricanes we have been following lately. This call was from an old friend of mine; we were classmates in seminary. Since then, I have very much respected his career path from writer to minister to environmental activist to investor, and even to candidate for political office.

He has decided to go further. He was calling to enlist my support as he launches a campaign to run for governor of his state. That is a high calling, and a high aspiration, indeed! Of course, I do not have a vote in his state, but I was honored that he was reaching out.

I hope my friend will not mind my sharing what he wrote me later. At Yale, we both studied with the wonderful spiritual guide, Henri Nouwen (who seemed to be writing a book a month in those days). My friend had often felt conflicted between his spiritual commitment and his desire to be politically involved for the good of the world; and he had had many talks with Henri about that conflict. Apparently, when he finally told Henri that he was going to run for lieutenant governor, Henri said, "I have been WAITING for you to make this decision!"

But my friend pressed: "What if I am drawn to this because of mixed motives - a desire to serve and a desire for recognition?" To which, Henri Nouwen replied, "We always have mixed motives. That's why we have confession. If we waited until our motives were pure, we wouldn't get anything done!"

Mixed motives.

Yes, we all have mixed motives. And no one of us is the perfect political candidate. Indeed, no one of us is the perfect anything. We are always a combination of success and failure, a combination of pride and shame, a combination of things done and things left undone, a combination of storm and calm. We are always a combination of mixed motives, no matter what we are doing.

But the best of us continue to offer ourselves. We continue to offer ourselves to institutions, and to systems, and to communities, who seek together to help and to serve the world. No one of us gets to be perfect in this life. But each of us does get to offer what we have to the world.

I realize that our own state of Georgia, and our city of Atlanta, will have a stormy and very crowded set of political contests in the next several months. Some good people are running for mayor, and some good people are running for governor. Some of them are friends of yours, and friends of mine. We will support some and not others. And we should. We should play our individual parts in participating in good government. No one of us is the perfect anything; but, together, we are better. Together, we get a little bit closer to our goal.

So, I salute every person who offers himself or herself for political office these days. Maybe our political season is calm at the moment. But, these days, those election processes can become rough and tumble contests, harshly divisive, quickly becoming all-or-nothing argumentative storms. I hear things that I would rather not hear, and sometimes I hear things that are simply wrong. I do not like people blowing trees down on top of other people.

But I salute these candidates, they who persevere in their calling. At their best, they agree that we work together, for the common good. They also teach all of us something: If we sense a call, if we hear a voice, follow it! No matter how mixed up we might feel about it, and no matter how stormy the weather might become. Follow that calling. It means something. God is working through us, even through our mixed motives and imperfections; and God is working through our political systems, even through their mixed motives and imperfections.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip