

Politics, Entertainment, and Service to “the least of these”

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We are certainly on a wild ride these days, as we follow the presidential candidates’ race! Some have called Trump’s campaign the “greatest show on earth” – but in truth, this epithet could be applied to the whole race. This past Monday was the first time I ever stayed up late to await the results of a caucus. As much as we lament how weird and wacky politics are these days, how coarse and abrasive – you’ve got to admit it is world-class entertainment.

And so I cannot help but compare the real-life drama unfolding before us with my latest TV-streaming indulgence: *Scandal*. Now the fast and furious pace of the intrigues, conspiracies, contracted-out murders and cover-ups depicted in this series are obviously fictional: however corrupt Washington may be, life there cannot possibly be that dramatic all the time.

Nevertheless, good TV drama - like a good play, a great novel, and yes, some of the stories depicted in the Bible – can give one pause to reflect on the nature of politics and power.

In the Bible (especially the Books of 1st and 2nd Samuel) we see how the rise of the Israelite monarchy comes about in response to the peoples’ clamoring “We want a king!”; how the prophet Samuel is conflicted about giving them one (thinking they should have no king but God); and how two young men, unsuspecting shepherds (first Saul, then David), are “chosen” by God – a life of power, privilege, and agonizing decisions thrust upon them. God has high hopes for both men. Both fail to live up to God’s standards, and despite the repeated invocations in traditional Jewish prayer for a restoration of the “kingship of David,” most Jews today understand this as a metaphor for a time of Jewish self-rule embodying peace and justice. Was David the “ideal” king? If he was the author of the Book of Psalms, then he was a passionate lover of God. But if we are to believe the Books of Samuel, David was caught up in *many* passions: love of women (including one already married), love of his friend Jonathan (son of King Saul), love of his own prowess as a warrior (slaying thousands of Philistines to boost his reputation), and, as almost all kings and other politicians ultimately become, in love with his own power.

As both the Books of Samuel and the series *Scandal* illustrate, most political personalities start out wanting to serve others: some constituency, whether a small town or a nation, some with a sense of serving God as well. But the simple rules that we all pay lip service to and that were encoded in the Ten Commandments – don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t covet, don’t give false testimony – these often don’t seem to apply to the powerful. Or at least those in power get lulled into thinking that they don’t. So King David has Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, killed in battle when his adultery with her results in pregnancy. In *Scandal* sexual improprieties, and even a murder in the White House are covered up (entailing further murders of those who would uncover the cover-up) *not* because those in power think that these deeds are not dastardly, but because, once committed, they tell themselves *that they must not be made known lest the republic fall*.

Shonda Rhimes, *Scandal*'s creator, has crafted a brilliant cogitation on power. Although the series' "hero," Olivia Pope, repeatedly talks about "wearing the white hat," she gradually becomes so entangled in power's dark web that she can no longer remember what is good, what is evil, and why she is fighting so hard to preserve such a corrupt "republic." One pivotal conversation she has with her father at Washington's Iwo Jima Memorial brings this crisis to a head:

"I don't know what the point is of this - of democracy and freedom and patriotism – if there are no white hats, if everyone is evil, if the deck is always stacked, if everyone I love is a monster, if no one is worth saving: what is the point?!"

Of course we are not all evil, not all monsters, and (as Olivia's rather sinister father points out) we are *all* "worth saving." But as I watch the current presidential race, I inevitably wonder: why do they *want* this job? Whose interests do these candidates have at heart? Do they want to better the lives of the disenfranchised – or hold onto the power and wealth of the historically-privileged class? Do they want to enhance the health of the planet – or protect the interests of industries that spew poisons and wreak environmental havoc (especially in the world's poorest countries)? Do they believe in anything that they say – or will they say anything to get elected?

If the latter is true (and I hope not!) – why do it? Why go through such an exhausting, grueling, perilous (yes, you will need bodyguards) ordeal if you are not filled with conviction that what you have to offer will leave the world a better place – not just for your own ethnic- or economic-group, but, if I may be permitted to quote Jesus, for "the least of these," the most vulnerable of our society (Matthew 25:40 & 45)? I believe Jesus had it right: the good we propose to accomplish through politics, if it is not in service to the "least of these" in our world, becomes instead a form of service to the idols of prejudice and fear, privileging one group at the expense of another.

Politics can be exciting, but power, for some, becomes a dark end unto itself. Let us pray that those into whose hands we entrust our nation, and our world, are guided by the highest principles of truth, justice, compassion and generosity towards all.

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