

Values and Politics—Do They Go Hand in Hand?

By Kara Griffiths

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt 7:7-8). While teaching His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus aspired to convey a very important message—a message that reflected His endless compassion. Jesus was telling His followers that when they come to Him, He will be there, and through Him, life will be fulfilling. In *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, George Washington Plunkitt speaks of a gratifying life with a very contrasting outlook, which strictly involved occupation, wealth, and his protection. This outlook lacked the true values mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount, and demonstrated the separation of religion and politics that does not necessarily have to occur, but does so naturally.

Although both Jesus and Plunkitt demonstrated compassion, they did this on very dissimilar levels. Jesus promised His love and guidance to all people, not just His followers. Jesus said, “For everyone who asks, receives . . .” Jesus chose to provide His strength on a universal level, whereas Plunkitt chose to only protect those who supported him. Jesus’ service was out of unconditional love and selflessness, for he received nothing in return. On the other hand, Plunkitt’s service was out of greed and self-interest, for with every generous act, he reaped votes and support. Plunkitt was not concerned for the well-being of the citizens of New York City. Instead, he was concerned solely for the welfare of Tammany men. After mentioning how his men lost jobs after Low took office, Plunkitt proclaims: “I placed a lot more on public works done by contractors, and no Tammany man goes hungry in my district. Plunkitt’s O.K. on an

application for a job is never turned down, for they all know that Plunkitt and Tammany don't stay out long" (Riordon 38). George Plunkitt never neglects to clarify which men he assists in finding jobs. Regardless of the setbacks his political organization endures, Plunkitt still continues to provide for his Tammany men—assuring that their lives will exceed the comfort of non-Tammany men.

Another distinction between Jesus and Plunkitt is the process in which one receives a helping hand, or a chance at a more satisfied life. Jesus' message on the mountain clearly implied that a personal effort must be made in order to gain knowledge or satisfaction. Jesus did not say: "The door will be opened." Instead, He said: ". . . to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." The implied meaning of these words was that clarity, truth, and happiness are derived from personal effort and faith in God, not just faith in God. Further on in the chapter, Jesus continued to say: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21). One cannot simply proclaim his or her belief in God in order to experience the glory of heaven—he or she must act upon his or her faith through compassionate actions that demonstrate God's love for the world. Unlike Jesus, Plunkitt believed that the glories of life should just be handed to Tammany men. Although Plunkitt did not receive aid to reach his political standard, when it came to helping others, he was not for a hand up, but for a hand out. Plunkitt said: "I know every big employer in the district and in the whole city, for that matter, and they ain't in the habit of sayin' no to me when I ask them for a job" (Riordon 28). Plunkitt believed that diminishing individual growth by handing away jobs without any personal effort required was a tolerable sacrifice as long as his support and number of votes increased.

Hypocrisy is considered a flaw on both the political and religious level. Usually, a successful politician stays true to his word while campaigning and while in office, which gains the trust of his or her constituents and eventually leads to re-election. The value of sincerity is a very important aspect of any political career and any charitable act. Without sincerity, aid is given for the wrong reasons and is neither truly beneficial to the recipient nor the benefactor. With the same regards, Jesus spoke about the hypocrisy of many Christians. Those who say they are Christians but do not reflect their love for Jesus through their actions are not truly Christians. In this aspect of hypocrisy, both politics and religion obtain the same views. However, hypocrisy on the religious level has a more in depth meaning and involves a wider understanding. Jesus taught that service, fasting, and sacrifices should be preformed in secret, without the consequence of self-elevation. "When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others" (Matt 6:2). Jesus taught that generous acts should be done in secret out of pure love for humankind and not with show to win the adoration and respect of others. Against Jesus' instructions, Plunkitt was sure to make his good deeds known to all of society. Plunkitt not only viewed service as a way to gain political power, but also, it often appeared that he longed for tragic incidences to occur; for he saw these tragedies as an opportunity to gain the votes of his constituents. Plunkitt states:

If there's a family in my district in want I know it before the charitable societies do, and me and my men are first on the ground. I have a special corps to look up such cases. The consequence is that the poor look up to George W. Plunkitt as a father, come to him in trouble—and don't forget him on election day. (Riordon 28)

Plunkitt chooses to utilize the struggles of everyday life as a means of manipulating his constituents into voting for him. Instead of clandestinely aiding the needs of his constituents, Plunkitt chose to flamboyantly appear as the “savior” of New York City.

Superficially, values appear to be crucial aspects of both politics and religion. Without values, it seems impossible to reflect true citizenship on both a political and worldwide level. From a religious standpoint, values of love, honesty, humility, and compassion are truly necessary and are reflected in many altruistic works throughout the world. However, values tend to be naturally diminished upon entering a political level. Although the reasons for this are socially understood, they should not be socially accepted. Often times, constituents become blind to the reality, which will be brought into office once a politician is elected. Constituents tend to hear and witness only what they wish—hoping the politician who will represent them next will exhibit all the appealing traits. Realistically, though, it is nearly impossible for a politician to demonstrate sincerity and values completely free of benefits, for whether or not it is intended, increased support and votes accompanies every act of citizenship.

Plunkitt’s views and Jesus’ teachings are not really comparable on the same level. Jesus’ teachings of selflessness and service are very necessary and apparent in a global citizen. However, a politician’s main goal is to please his or her constituents and increase their number of votes. Although a politician must demonstrate concern for his or her people, he literally cannot do so without the hypocrisy Jesus mentions. Although the art of politics can never fully reflect the values Jesus mentions on the Sermon on the Mount, they can mirror them in the fullest way possible. George Plunkitt was nowhere close to reflecting Jesus’ values in Tammany Hall, which most likely led to the corruption of Tammany and the disdain later felt towards the organization. Jesus said to the people: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s

clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15). Tammany Hall was a false prophet, and George W. Plunkitt dressed in wool. Beneath his apparently kind demeanor, Plunkitt was a ravenous wolf out for votes and power without a trace of true concern for values, respect for his constituents, or sincere citizenship.