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We need candidates who are really religious

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From *Where I Stand*

The closer the United States gets to choosing a president, the more the event begins to look like a papal election: it's all about religion and little about what religion teaches.

The United States, we love to say -- and Europeans repeat in a kind of incredulous wonder -- is the most "religious" country in the world. Meaning, of course, the most church-going country in the world. Whether or not going to church correlates well with religious values is clearly a debatable subject. To wit, the corporal works of mercy -- as in, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, house the homeless, visit the imprisoned, visit the sick, and bury the dead. It is on these criteria in Matthew 25: 31-46, however, that Jesus rests his definition of salvation. No small thing for those who considers themselves "religious." No small thing, then, one would think, if a nation -- if a candidate for political office -- were really serious about being "religious."

Point: The corporal works of mercy would, it seems, be a very clear template, a constant standard in such a nation, for the evaluation of a party platform, a legislative program or a candidate's fitness for office by those who consider themselves Christian. You can picture the score card now: Candidate A proposes keeping two of the works of mercy; Candidate B, five of them. Forget the need to count votes. The winner is ...

In the nation in which, they tell us, the last two elections were decided by Catholic and Evangelical Christians, the need to define what we mean when we say we're looking for a candidate with "religious"

values is not an idle exercise. Given all our commitment to bible-quoting candidates, how do we stack up as a religious people against the religious principles we're told are essential to Christianity? The answers may make us all think again about what religion really means where politics are concerned.

If "feeding the hungry" is a basic, we're slipping, no matter how much we congratulate ourselves on our virtue. According to Bread for the World, a faith-based movement seeking justice for the world's hungry, over 35 million people -- including 12.4 million children -- live in hunger in the United States. They skip meals regularly or, when they eat, eat too little. Some of them go without food, the report says, for entire days. But hungry children develop more chronic illnesses, suffer more from anxiety and depression, and have more behavior problems than children who eat regularly. Those children we put in our institutions, call them social problems, and hire more police to keep them in line rather than feed them well.

If "clothing the naked" -- sending people into the world with dignity and propriety -- is a work of mercy, we will need legislators who are committed to spending money on education. With the amount of money we have spent on the war in Iraq -- over \$449 billion -- we could have provided 21 million four-year college scholarships to young people whose parents are already strained to the financial break-point. That means, of course, that we need legislators who indicate a willingness to spend money on the intellectual future of this country. Then maybe, in the future, we wouldn't have so many wars.

If "giving drink to the thirsty" is a work of mercy, we could be doing something on a national level to save the water supply in this country. We would need legislators intent on controlling the global warming that is turning the southwest into a dust bowl and threatening to swamp property on the coastlands of the United States. We could be putting money into saving the water we have before water is no longer free and the poor cannot afford that either.

If "housing the homeless" is a work of mercy, we could at least match our housing chest with our war chest to provide four million new public housing projects. The U.S. Conference of Mayors "Hunger and Homelessness Survey" of 23 major cities in 2006 reports that 59 percent of those cities report an increase in requests for emergency shelter for families in the past year alone. Almost 30 percent of those appeals went unmet for lack of resources, the report tells us, as we agonize over which political candidate is more religious than the other ones.

If "visiting the sick" is a work of mercy, we might want to ask legislators who are seeking to renew their long-running terms in office why it is that of the 45 million uninsured people, 21 million of them are full-time workers? Whatever happened to the notion that if we worked hard in this country, we could take care of ourselves?

If "visiting prisoners" is a work of mercy, then it is time to think again about how closely religious values parallel our institutional goals. According to Human Rights Watch, September, 2007, "Most inmates [in U.S. prisons] had scant opportunities for work, training, education, treatment or counseling because of taxpayer resistance to increasing spending on prison rehabilitation programs." Clearly, we are a "lock 'em up and throw away the key" society. We send them to prison, do almost nothing to prepare them to live a decent life outside of it, and then wonder why the recidivism rate is as high as it is.

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If "bury the dead" is work of mercy, then it is time to increase home health care facilities. According to the National Association for Home Care and Hospice, "one in five U.S. households are involved in home health care for an adult." Nevertheless, in August, Medicare announced proposed cuts of \$7 billion dollars to local home health care agencies. Surely we need legislators who are intent on providing caregivers and families the support they need to care for their sick and earn a decent living themselves at the same time.

It's time, it seems, if we're Christian, to judge people the way Jesus told us to judge them: "By their fruits." But if that's the case, then the question is not: What do each of these candidates tell us about how religious they are? The question is: What do each of these candidates plan to do to make the corporal works of mercy a living sign of the Christian tradition in this so-called Christian culture?

In fact, how conscious are we of the silent erosion of each of these works of mercy in the society around us while we define "religion" as single-issue politics? After all, food and education and decent housing and support services are exactly the things that take the strain off families and make abortion unnecessary.

From where I stand, it may well be our own unawareness of the loss of these services that's making it so difficult for us to make a distinction between what is really "religious" about our candidates and what is only religion being used as another kind of slippery election strategy. God save us all from that kind of religion again.

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