

## **Religion and Politics**

Jeremiah 7:1-7, Luke 18:9-14

“...for all who exalt themselves will be humbled,  
but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Luke 18:14

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May 22, 2005

This morning we continue a sermon series on three of the major tensions of our time. Several Sundays ago, the subject was faith and science. Next week, we will focus on the relationship between Christians and Jews. Today, we dance with the bear of religion and politics.

It is impossible to listen to the news or to have a dinner party conversation without encountering the topic, and my, oh my, do people have feelings about it! Last week, I stopped one day for a quick lunch at Dusty's BBQ over on Briarcliff. As I waited for my pork sandwich and sweet tea, I decided to pass the time by reading a book, the title of which, *One Electorate Under God? A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics*. (I am, in fact, a contributor to this book, jointly published by the non-partisan Pew Forum and Brookings Institution.) When my lunch arrived, I set the book down on the table and began to eat my sandwich and chips. A man passed by on his way to the cash register. He glanced down, looked at the title of the book, and then looked at me squarely in the face. He said, “Hmph!,” and walked away. I didn't know what that “hmp” meant, but I don't think it was good, do you?

One would be hard-pressed to find an area of American life that is more wracked with controversy than God and country. Democrats and Republicans are at each other's throats right now in Washington over the filibuster, with some Republicans accusing the Democrats of discriminating against the President's judicial nominees on the basis of whether or not they follow a conservative or a liberal religious agenda. Out in Colorado, a chaplain in the Air Force describes what she calls “a systematic and pervasive” problem with Christian proselytizing at the United States Air Force Academy, which is a tax supported, state sponsored institution. (1) A Baptist pastor in Waynesville, NC has resigned under fire from his church as a result of turmoil

that he created last fall when he admonished his congregation from the pulpit, “Let me say this right now. If you vote for John Kerry this year, you need to repent or resign...you have been holding back God’s church too long.” (2)

I am going to go out on a limb this morning, but I will wager that there are some people in this congregation who voted for John Kerry in November. I am also sure that there are people in this congregation who voted for George Bush. I am going to go out on another limb and say that I agree with the conviction expressed on a bumper sticker I saw in Ansley Park last week. It read, “God is not a Republican or a Democrat.” I also agree with Jim Wallis, author of the bestselling book, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*. Our nation desperately needs a new vision for faith and politics, one that neither banishes the values and language of religion from public discourse nor identifies one political party’s agenda as God’s agenda.

Let’s look at the history of our republic for a little perspective on these two extremes. In answer to the total banishment approach, one can turn to almost any chapter in America’s past. In his radio address on D-Day, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944, President Roosevelt invited the nation to join him in prayer. “Almighty God,” the President prayed, “our sons, the pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a might endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion and our civilization and to set free a suffering humanity. Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, and steadfastness to their faith . . . “

Turn to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the movement to abolish slavery, to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century effort to give women the right to vote, to the 1950s and 1960s battles to extend civil rights to all people in America, regardless of the color of their skin. Each of these great struggles is washed in the language of religion and grounded in theological convictions about the sovereignty of God and the basic dignity of human beings before God.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States and wrote of this nation:

Religion in America, takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions...I do not know whether all Americans have a sincere faith in their religion—for who can search the human heart?—but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation and to every rank of society. (3)

One hundred seventy-four years later, such is still the case. But what also rings true about America is the brilliant idea of the separation of church and state. In answer to the other extreme -that it is only fair and right that America become an officially Christian nation- it must be said explicitly that the United States constitution forbids such a thing. The First Amendment to the Constitution reads, in part, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” Article VI, Clause 3 reads, “...no test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States of America.” Herein lies the greatness of our Republic. No nation has better protected the individual from any uninvited intrusion into his or her inner conscience or the outer practice of faith. This distinctive American idea is “the most striking contribution of America to the science of government.” (4)

We live in a religiously diverse nation. The first Jews landed on North American shores in 1654. We have always been a religiously diverse nation. For the first two hundred years, our nation was marked by a strong Protestant majority. In the twentieth century, America elected its first Roman Catholic president. As immigration from non-western countries continues to increase, we are becoming an even more pluralistic land, with Sheiks and Buddhists and Muslims and Mormons and people who follow no faith tradition at all. Every single one of us is guaranteed the right to practice our religion or not to practice religion. We are guaranteed not to have the government establish any one religion over another. This is the essence of the American way.

An Islamic mosque is being built on 14<sup>th</sup> Street. Do you know how many worshippers are expected for Friday prayer services at the new mosque? Two thousand! Two thousand of our Intown Atlanta neighbors follow a different faith tradition than the one that we follow as

Presbyterians. Are they less worthy citizens than we? It is not the responsibility of the Christian church to make America a Christian nation. Our responsibility is to be faithful Christian communities within our republic, advocating the justice and righteousness of God as revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to bear witness in word and deed to Christ's saving love, and to embody his mercy and compassion.

Our responsibility is to be the conscience of the society of which we are a part, acknowledging always that sometimes God works through Christians and sometimes God is at work in spite of those who call themselves Christians. Witness those 19th century southern Presbyterians who invoked God's name in the defense of slavery. Witness the Germans who called themselves Christians in the 1930s who condoned Hitler's persecution of Jews and homosexuals. To claim that you are following Christ does not necessarily mean that you are following Christ. A frightening contemporary example in our country today is what is called the Dominionism Movement. This is a loose hybrid of various fundamentalists on the right who share the belief that America should be a Christian nation, that political power should only be in the hands of Christians and that the purpose of the United States is to Christianize the rest of the world. One of the chief spokesmen of the Movement, a man named Frank Wright, is the new president of the National Religious Broadcasters who claim to reach 141 million listeners and viewers each week. (5)

America is a free country and people have the right to say what they think, even if it flies in the face of everything you and I might hold dear. But that does not mean that the field has to be left to those who would distort Christianity and who would diminish the foundational principles of our great democracy. Other Christian voices need to be heard.

In our Presbyterian tradition, we believe in the power of God's word to judge and expose any false human word. There needs to be an alternative Christian voice to the voice of the far right that is so often filled with arrogance and judgment. That is not to say that judgment is antithetical to the ways of God. Centuries ago, the word of God came to the prophet Jeremiah. The Lord told him to go and stand at the very gates of the Temple and say to the people who believed that they were being so religious that they had forgotten the most important thing. They had forgotten the

practice of justice. They had forgotten to care for the disenfranchised and the alien, the widow and the orphan in their midst. This is what one might call “prophetic politics.” (6)

Where is the word from the Christian community about these matters that lie at the heart of our faith tradition? The Bible says little about homosexuality and nothing about abortion, but it has a great deal to say about the chasm between the haves and the have-nots. It has a great deal to say about how the disenfranchised are treated. One in every sixteen verses in the New Testament is about either the poor or the subject of money. In the Gospel of Luke, one in every seven verses is directed towards this core theme of our faith tradition. (7)

One has to wonder where Christians were during the last legislative session in Georgia. They were marching in streets, all right, about this and that; particularly about gay marriage, but I didn’t hear about any rallies on behalf of poor children and their families when the Georgia Legislature was in session. I haven’t seen many rallies on the national level as people of faith express their concerns about the slashing of domestic programs in order to pay for the ongoing war in Iraq. The question is: what is stopping us from trying with all of our might to change our country so that justice can flow down like waters and righteousness like an every flowing stream? We are free to stand for the great principles of our faith. We are filled already with the spirit of liberty, and it is our choice as to whether or not we act in the power of the spirit.

One of the great judges of our country was a man named Learned Hand. He once posed this question, “What then is the spirit of liberty? It is the spirit that weighs other’s interests alongside its own without bias; it remembers that not even a sparrow falls to the earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of him who 2,000 years ago taught humanity the lesson it has never learned but has never quite forgotten, that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.”

In a wonderful piece entitled “Repentance and Politics,” United Methodist Bishop William Willimon writes, “The Christian doctrine of original sin, this unpleasant fact in which we get our noses rubbed on Sunday morning, is our gift to the body politic.” No individual, no institution, not even a great institution like the United States of America, is perfect. All humans sin and all

fall short of the glory of God. It is not unpatriotic to say that our nation is imperfect. It is simply the truth, and only the truth will keep us free.

One day, Jesus told a parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and who regarded others with contempt. After he told the story, he said those who exalt themselves are the ones who inevitably will be humbled, but those who have the spiritual strength to humble themselves and to ask God for mercy and guidance and correction, are the ones who will be exalted. Humility is a virtue. It is a virtue for an individual and for a nation. Humility makes civil discourse possible. Humility keeps human beings from falling under the power of fanaticism, which to my mind poses the greatest threat to human society in our time. Fanaticism in religion is extreme dogmatism; in politics, it is totalitarianism.(8) Fanatic Christianity can be just as demonic as any other kind of religious fanaticism because fanaticism begets hatred, and hatred is the enemy of the future of civilized life.

I close with a story from the Jewish tradition told by Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. A man is in a boat. He is not alone but he acts as if he were. One night he begins to cut a hole under his seat. His neighbors shout, “Have you gone mad? Do you want to sink us all?” He answers, “What I do is none of your business. I paid my way. I’m only cutting under my own seat.” (9)

What the fanatic cannot accept, and what you and I must never forget, is that in our rapidly shrinking world and in this richly diverse nation, we are all in the same boat. We sink or we go forward together.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident: 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. (10)*

Thanks be to God for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, divine and simple gifts to which we are all entitled.

- (1) *New York Times*, May 12, 2005
- (2) *New York Times*, May 16, 2005
- (3) *Democracy in America*
- (4) Sanford Cobb, American historian
- (5) Chris Hedges, "Feeling the Hate with Religious Broadcasters," *Harper's Magazine*, May, 2005
- (6) Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, HarperCollins Books, 2005
- (7) *Ibid.*, p.212
- (8) Elie Wiesel, "When passion is Dangerous," *Parade Magazine*, April 19, 1992.
- (9) *Ibid.*
- (10) *The Declaration of Independence*