

Can we mix religion and politics?

First in the series: Being a red-letter Christian in a black and white world

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Text: Luke 4:14-22

Theme: We have always been told that religion and politics don't mix and that there should be separation of church and state. But is that the way Christians should respond? Is it not true that we inject our faith into our politics at every opportunity? If faith is our core belief system of God, others, and ourselves, then doesn't this show up in how we vote, how we stand on moral and political issues?

It is rare that the opening prayer of a state legislature makes the news. It is even rarer that the prayer from the great state of Florida would be run in its entirety in the New York Times, but that is just what happened after Donald Roberts, the president and CEO of Goodwill Industries offered a prayer before the Florida Senate in 2000. I will read the prayer in its entirety because it is so humorous, witty, and it does indeed set a good foundation on a sermon about politics. This is how it went.

Holy and Eternal God, it must be great to be God, to get what you want—when you want it—how you want it. We mere mortals are not that lucky. We are always having to compromise to get what we want. We call the process "politics." You see, O Lord, we find Senator Jennings' priority number one is Senator McKay's priority number five and Governor Bush's priority number ten; and Senator Carlton doesn't even know it's on the agenda while Secretary of State Kathryn Harris is busy closing down shop. In the midst of all this "politicking" during Session, we know we are supposed to "Be still and know" your will for our lives and all the people of the State of Florida—with every lobbyist in the world bugging us to death. So, God, while we acknowledge you never said discipleship would be easy, we do call upon you to come and be in these Senate Chambers today. Thank you, Lord, the Session is almost over, the budget deal is cut, education got some more money, we cut a few taxes, and in the end, most everyone in this chamber didn't get everything they wanted. And that's the good news. That's politics, Lord, and unless you want to move over and give us the job of being God, which some of us think is our birthright, we will have to muddle along being satisfied with being the best politicians you can create. It's the fun part of being human. In the name of the God of all things, even politics and politicians and in rare instances a lobbyist or two, Amen.¹

We live in political times. Turn on the news it is all about Hillary, Barrack, or John , or about primaries, delegates, and super-delegates, or if the candidates aren't doing much then the focus goes to their pastors. Thank goodness no one here is running for office. In fact if you are thinking of running for office any time in the near future perhaps you should miss this sermon series.

For many months I have wanted to preach a sermon series about how do we as Christians make moral, ethical, and political decisions in a world that is increasingly polarized by culture wars. I did not intentionally wait for it to be my last series because I was worried about being escorted out but I didn't want to leave without addressing the church's role in social transformation. So I am beginning a series entitled, "Being a red-letter Christian in a black and white world" and today I am asking the question can we mix religion and politics?

I promise that during this series I am NOT going to tell you who to vote for, or what party has the best ideas or vision, and I am not going to attack any of our political leaders. But I am going to push you to think about what is your role as a Christian in our culture? I am going to introduce you to some of the prophetic voices speaking out against structures of greed, violence, power, and oppression. I am going

to keep asking how your faith and your understanding of Jesus' message deals with the issues that face each of us every day of our lives.

I chose the name for this series because I see our culture becoming more and more polarized every day. Either you are Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, red or blue, pro-war or anti-war, pro-gay or anti-gay, pro-choice or anti-abortion and you get the idea. The middle ground of reason seems to be gobbled up by the strident voices from the edges making informed and graceful conversation extremely difficult. For too long the religious Right, with its narrow and rigid agenda, drove a wedge into our culture while the secular Left, with its obsession in political correctness, opted out.

Jim Wallis, who I consider to be one of the great prophetic voices in America today wrote in his book, "God's Politics: Why the Right gets it wrong and the Left doesn't get it at," "The religious and political Right gets the public meaning of religion mostly wrong – preferring to focus on sexual and cultural issues while ignoring the weightier matters of justice. And the secular Left does not seem to get the meaning and promise of faith for politics at all – mistakenly dismissing spirituality as irrelevant to social change."² I am convinced that this Left/Right bunker mentality produced a battlefield that few Christians were willing to walk onto and so the thinkers among us remained silent. The end result over the last couple decades is a church that is becoming more and more irrelevant leaving issues caused by injustice, greed, oppression, violence, and power to go unresolved.

Let me give you an illustration for what either/or, black and white polarized encampment mentality does to our ability to reason. On the screen behind me I am showing a photograph that is 100% white and 100% black. There are no shades of grey. With this lack of information it is impossible for us to truly understand the subject. We can only speculate what is in this picture. Now we will add midtones and now the picture takes on meaning and we begin to see shapes and gradations. More information is needed before we can really understand what this picture is.

In the final picture we see a full range of color and now we see the picture of a sea of flowers in a field. Now we can make statements about it with understanding and reason. Too often when we stay locked in our black/white, liberal/conservative, my way/your way perspectives it is like trying to make an informed decision using the first picture and not the last.

It is hard to make decisions today but it is even made harder by some of the new trends pushing against informed decision making. We live in an age where we try to reduce major issues into 30 second sound bites, where the attention span of the average American keeps shrinking, where reading is vanishing, where a whole generation of young adults are turning to comedians like Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and Jay Leon to get their news rather than Walter Cronkite, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, or Peter Jennings, where candidates are "handled" by teams of trained spin doctors, where the issues are so complicated that the average person depends on experts to decipher, where news is on 24/7, where stories can be put on the internet without verification, and where UTube often has more power than legitimate news sources. So I ask again HOW DO WE AS CHRISTIANS MAKE DECISIONS?

Let me make one last comment on the title before I get too far into the sermon. I realize that not all of you are familiar with the "red letter" reference. Several months ago someone asked me why their Bible was filled with red type. I explained that in some Bibles all the words attributed to Jesus were in red. Then she said, "So these are the words we really ought to pay attention to, right? What would happen if we lived by these words and none others?"

I have spent too much time telling you about how I came up with the title for the series so now let's get to the central question of the day – can we or should we mix religion and politics? If I was to take a poll this morning I bet every adult in this room has heard or even spoken the warning: never mix politics

and religion – especially in family gatherings. True? If I had a dollar for every family gathering that was destroyed by this lethal combination I could retire today.

So what is politics? Novelist and playwright, Gore Vidal looked up etymology of the word and found “poly” meaning many and “ticks” meaning blood sucking insects and so politics would be a whole lot of blood sucking folks making decisions about how to run our country. Some days I think that is an accurate definition.

I don’t think that I ever disclosed it before but one of my majors in college was political science and I remember studying the “father of political science” Harold Lasswell. He had a very simple definition for politics that I still remember. Politics is the “process for determining who gets what, when, and how.” In his book with that name published in 1935 he writes that politics is about power, control, and distribution and it does require some sense of morality or sense of right and wrong to make decisions.

I would argue that as Christians our faith should inform how those decisions are made, especially since Christ was so emphatic about how to treat the poor, marginalized, enemies, and aliens in our midst. I would argue that we should definitely mix politics and religion so that the needs of the poor are met.

But don’t just listen to me. Hear it from the lips of two current politicians. Former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee said, “Politics are totally directed by worldview. That’s why when people say, ‘We ought to separate politics from religion,’ I say to separate the two is absolutely impossible.”

Current Democratic frontrunner Barrack Obama wrote, “The problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed are not simply technical problems in search of a perfect ten point plan. They are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness – in the imperfections of man. Solving these problems will require changes in government policy, but it will also require changes in heart and a change in minds. Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public square. Frederick Douglas, Abe Lincoln, William Jennings Bryant, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, indeed the majority of great reformers in American history were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their personal morality into public policy debates is a practical absurdity.”

Adam Hamilton, one of my favorite and most thoughtful United Methodist pastors says, “Our democracy rises and falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience to get involved in the political process.” He then says that the people who should be some of the most thoughtful and conscientious are Christians because we worship a leader named Jesus who was an extreme social, political, and religious reformer.

We often forget when we toss around names like Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes, and Sicarii that they were the political parties of the day. We forget that the very title “Messiah” was just as much a political title as it was a religious one. We forget that when Jesus delivered his very first sermon in Mark he stated, “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” It was a political statement! He was calling upon the people of earthly kingdoms to turn their power, allegiance, and positions over to a new king with a new agenda. Jesus was not afraid to mix religion with politics – in fact that is what he did from the beginning to the end of his ministry and it is what got him nailed to a cross.

Think about the words of the story read this morning. Jesus enters his hometown synagogue and he stands to read from the book of Isaiah. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

If you use Lasswell's definition of politics this is a political statement. It is a statement of reordering social structures, of freeing victims of political and religious oppression, of healing those who are in need of social services not being offered, and of bringing in a new religio-socio-political order.

Then he says the unimaginable. He says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The looks went quickly from admiration about their golden boy returning home to anger and outrage that he has come home with a political agenda. They are so enraged they take him to the brow of the hill and want to stone him immediately.

We often forget that the Lord's Prayer is a political prayer. In it Jesus declares "Thy Kingdom come." He didn't say Caesar's kingdom come. No he called for a new kingdom. We often forget that the parables were political stories. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man was about the treatment of the poor and the distribution of resources. The parable of the Good Samaritan cast a light on how the aliens in our midst are treated. The parable of the talents is about stewardship of our resources.

But the granddaddy of all political and religious statements was the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew. There is nothing anywhere in other religions or in any political archives that compares to these three chapters. This is not just a compilation of good advice for how we live together; this is the announcement of a new world order. This is an inversion of systems that have been in place for generations, of processes that have been established by powers that don't want to be changed, of laws that were put in place to keep people in place.

Jim Wallis writes in his book "The Great Awakening" that the Sermon on the Mount serves as the manifesto of his new order, the Magna Carta of the new age, the constitution of the kingdom. It utterly reverses the logic of this world, all its earthly kingdoms, and all its political options."³ It is a call to revolution but not to violence. It is a call to reverse the values, assumptions, and norms of our culture.

Make no mistake about it Christ was absolutely political! Make no mistake about it Christ mixed politics and religion in his kingdom message and he called for a transformation of society. He called for us today to look at the issues that face us and view them through the lens of the Sermon on the Mount. So let's try it right now. I want you to think of the biggest issue that faces our culture right now. I am going to ask you what that is in just a second but there are some ground rules. I don't want you to declare that issue in connection with any political party or politician and I don't want you to use the statement as a way of judging others or demeaning them.

So what are some of the biggest issues of the day? (Listen for the responses and write some down. When enough people have spoken then begin again.)

Some of the prophets of today say that all the major issues can be broken into four categories.

1. How we treat the poor, marginalized, weak, and the alien in our midst.
2. How we treat our enemies and the war we wage against others.
3. How we treat our planet and our call to proper stewardship that goes back to the first story of the Bible.
4. How we treat our God and what other gods we put on the altar to worship.

I would like for you to think about your particular issue, whatever that might be and in whatever category that might fall and then ask yourself, "What does your faith in Jesus Christ have to say about that issue?"

Can you dare use the Sermon on the Mount to inform how you should act and transform the piece of the community that is your responsibility to shape?

Can you love your enemy?

Can you protect the lives and dignity of the oppressed?

Can you welcome the alien?

Can you lift up and encourage those who are being persecuted?

Can you feed the homeless?

Can you visit the prisoners?

Can you reach out to the marginalized?

Can you share your wealth?

Can you forgive rather than retaliate?

Can you be a “red-letter Christian” in a black and white world?

¹ “Weblog: The Way We Believe Now, According to the New York Times,” Christianity Today.com

² Jim Wallis, “God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It” HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, p2-3.

³ Jim Wallis, “The Great Awakening” Kindle version location 1054-61