

## A revival is coming!

### Third sermon in series: Being a Red-letter Christian in a black and white world

Preached Sunday, June 1, 2008

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Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Theme: Both Brian McLaren and Jim Wallis talk about a shift in the political and religious landscapes and they see a revival coming that will move beyond bad religion, partisan politics, and offer a new way. McLaren calls it a “revolution of hope.” Wallis calls it the “great awakening” or the revival built on hope.

I read four humorous questions about politics that make you want to laugh and scratch your head. For instance, why is it that we choose from just two people to run for President of the United States and 50 for Miss America?

Why is it that politically appointed judges decided that the Bible could not be read in our public schools but could be read in our prisons? Why is it that those same judges decided it was okay to swear on the Bible inside the courtroom but we can't have the Ten Commandment displayed on the exterior walls?

Finally, do you know why I don't approve of political jokes? I have seen too many of them elected to office.

This morning I am going to preach the final sermon in this very short sermon series, “Being a red-letter Christian in a black and white world.” This is a series that I wish I could have started a lot earlier or run a lot longer because – as many of you have pointed out – we are just brushing the surface. There are a lot of areas that we could explore as we try to come up with solutions to the problems facing our culture right now. So far in this sermon series I have talked about divisions and polarization of our country, about the culture wars that were actually instigated by the Religious Right in a response to the liberal pendulum swing of the 60s, and about the over simplification of complex moral, ethical, and spiritual decisions into black versus white partisan position statements.

Last week I said that we as Christians are called to present an alternative option to the world – the option of being a contagious witness of the Kingdom of God through sacrificial love. I believe with all my heart that the red-letter words of the Gospel contain our marching orders for societal transformation. I believe that the Sermon on the Mount is nothing less than the manifesto of a new alternative community that if lived will transform the world. The Kingdom values are like leaven where even a little makes a huge difference.

Can you remember back to the first sermon when I asked the question what are some of the biggest issues facing our culture today? Nearly every one of you had a response. I would summarize them with this very abbreviated list: impoverishment in the midst of wealth, religious, ideological, and cultural differences that never seem to be resolved, the threat of climate change, disease pandemics around the world, genocide and violations of human rights, the threats of terrorism and endless war in response, the breakdown of families and communities, the persistent divisions of race, class, and gender, and the multiple threats to human life and dignity.

That is a huge and depressing list. It would not be so depressing if I felt there were systems – particularly political systems – in place making changes and addressing the issues. But we know there are not. We are caught up in a misguided, polarized, partisan political system where issues are really ignored and the focus is more on fear, blame, and manipulation of power. This cannot be laid at the feet of any one political party. The responsibility for the lack of vision is owned by all.

The Church, with a capital C, is no better. I have said before that the Religious Right with its narrow, judgmental, exclusive, and even violent agenda has scored major victories at the expense of turning people away from Christ. The Secular Left has been so worried about being politically correct and non-offensive that it has lost its backbone. But the answer to bad religion is not an elimination of religion. The answer to bad religion is to embrace a better religion on both the personal and public level.

I am talking about a religion that will not be co-opted by the agendas of power and politics that uses the Sermon on the Mount as its guidelines and makes decisions based on the common good rather than the good of the powerful.

I am talking about a religion that cares about personal transformation, spiritual renewal, and grounding in prayer as well as the transforming work of social justice ministry.

I am talking about a faith that moves beyond labels and combines the best of what both sides have to offer. Perhaps instead of black/white, liberal/conservative, we can begin a new inclusive group known as a “conservative radical” – one who is rooted in scripture, tradition, and personal piety while also seeking radical ministries in social justice.

I am talking about a faith that requires our best thinking, creativity, dialogue, surrender, sharing, prayer, accountability, integrity, and vulnerability.

I am talking about a faith that is not afraid to let the Holy Spirit work within us, to transform us, to enliven us, to shake us up so that we might be renewed and revived. I am talking about a faith that never loses hope in what can be when we let the Holy Spirit do its work.

Two of our social and religious prophets of our day, Brian McLaren and Jim Wallis talk of just such a faith. Both have been working with the religious groups of the country and both see this faith bubbling up from below. Both see what they call a revival coming. McLaren calls it a “revolution of hope.” Wallis calls it the “great awakening.” I don’t care what we call it but I hope and pray that the revival comes and moves us past bad religion, partisan politics, polarized culture, and offers us a new way to cultural transformation.

In his book “The Great Awakening,” Jim Wallis writes that revivals often occur when politics is broken, when the systems of the day fail to address the most significant moral and social issues of the day. It is then that social movements, especially faith-based movements, rise up to transform politics. Listen to the names of the deeply spiritual reformers of the past who stood tall when society was faltering. John Wesley, John Newton, William Wilberforce, Charles Finney, William Jennings Bryan, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Paul II, Lech Walesa, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Sojourner Truth, and the countless others who make up the “cloud of witnesses” (as the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews put it) have proven that faith revivals can change the world.<sup>1</sup>

But why now? Why do both prophets see the beginning of another great spiritual revival? Three reasons. First, Wallis states that the “monologue of the Religious Right is over and a new dialogue has now begun.”<sup>2</sup> In some of the conservative, non-denominational, mega-churches there has been a growing awareness that the theology of the past was misguided, and there needs to be a shift to a more compassionate theology that moves beyond partisan politics. He is able to site some of the major players in some of the major churches as finally making this positive shift.

Second, on the other side of the spectrum the Secular Left that has been pushing social justice issues has run out of energy. They had become great with the mechanics of change but lost touch with the reason for it. They knew the how but forgot the why. I recall stories from the late Sixties of good-

minded, white liberals making their way south to participate in civil rights marches and protests. The good white folk would get impatient with their black sisters and brothers when they insisted on going back to their churches to pray and worship. Over time the white folk slowly disappeared and lost interest, but the black folk stayed never losing their connection and power.

A white professor of mine who participated in some of the demonstrations recalled, “They prayed, they worshiped, and they reconnected to the power that made the change possible. Many whites did not and lost interest when society would not change fast enough.” The Secular Left wants to reconnect! There is a movement of good, social-minded, justice-oriented, liberal activists who are coming to churches searching and reconnecting to the “why” of the Gospel.

Finally, both Wallis and McLaren say that our young adults are tired of inadequate solutions provided by the political and religious systems of our day and are demanding something better. Young adults are not willing to waste their time listening to narrow, judgmental, blame and shame sermons. They want to make a difference and change the world. So when the Church offers mission and combines it with a message of transformation, hope, grace, and justice they are coming back.

So what is our role as the Body of Christ in this community? What is your role as a leader in this church? Wallis says that the church needs to change. The church needs to stop being a thermometer, which takes a reading of the temperature of the world and reports it dutifully, and needs to become the thermostat that actually changes the social temperature around us.<sup>3</sup>

In order to change the temperature in our world we need to take the words of Christ to heart and let them change our hearts. Societal transformation begins with personal transformation. Wallis says, “Faith can provide the fire, the passion, the strength, the perseverance, and the hope necessary for social movements to win, and to change politics. Without that, it’s just a debate over issues and ideas. And when the going gets tough or even risky and dangerous, many people will give up (or go back to watching television)—unless they have learned to tap the deep resources of faith.”<sup>4</sup>

Christ’s red-letter words not only need to change us but they should be the foundation for every decision we make and every policy we try to change. We need to take his words, like the ones read today about the treatment of hungry, homeless, stranger, poor, sick, and prisoner seriously. I believe with all of my heart that we will not be judged in end times by whether we had our theology right but if we had our priorities in life right. Did we clothe the naked? Did we feed the hungry? Did we welcome the stranger? Did we help the poor? Did we love our enemies? Did we stick up for the outcast or did we cave in to the powerful? Did we stand up for the victims of abusive systems or did we add to the abuse?

My friends, the red-letter words of Jesus are a problem. They are dangerous. They are revolutionary. They are the words of a new kingdom where compassion, mercy, justice, grace, forgiveness, and hope reign. But there is a price for following those words.

It is not easy to live out the red letters of the Gospel. Those red letters cause the black and white, and gray and red, blue, rainbow world to tremble in fear. Let me tell you a story of trembling.

In January 1956, when Martin Luther King Jr. was a young minister and living out the red letter words by leading the Montgomery bus boycott, he started to get death threats. One evening he had what he later referred to as his “kitchen table conversion.” It was around midnight and King was struggling to get to sleep when the phone rang. “Listen, n\*\*\*\*\*,’ an ugly voice crackled over the wire, ‘we’re tired of you and your mess now. If you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.” All of a sudden the red-letter words he had been living were

far too dangerous. All of a sudden they went from being words that brought comfort to words that brought fear.

King paced his bedroom floor and then went down to the kitchen where he made himself some coffee. He later admitted that he was ready to give up and to cave into his weakness. In the past he would call upon his father or his mother for advice but that was not an option. So he called out to the Holy Spirit –“the power to make a way out of no way.” Until now he had been relying on his hand-me-down faith. But now that would not do. He had to dig deep and find God for himself.

He later preached, “With my head in my hands, I bowed down over that cup of coffee. Oh, yes, I prayed a prayer. I prayed out loud that night. The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.

Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right.

I think the cause that we represent is right.

But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now.

I’m faltering.

I’m losing my courage.

I am afraid.

The people are looking to me for leadership. I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.

I am at the end of my powers.

I have nothing left.

I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”

“At that moment,” he continued, “I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. I could hear an inner voice saying to me, Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for the truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world. I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.

No, never alone. No, never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.”<sup>5</sup>

My sisters and brother, I believe a revival is coming. A revival of faith where you and I will be called upon to stand like the saints of the past, like Martin Luther King Jr. did so long ago, and to live those red letter words right where we have been planted.

Just remember this – no matter how frightening, how fearful, how intimidating this might be Jesus will not leave you alone. No never alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Wallis, Jim. “The Great Awakening,” Kindle version, 2007 Location #460

<sup>2</sup> Wallis, Location #596

<sup>3</sup> Wallis, Location #1127-34

<sup>4</sup> Wallis, Location #414-421

<sup>5</sup> Wallis, Location #388-400 (Borrowing from a story told by Stewart Burns)