

The Politics of God and the Freedom of the Pulpit.

H. Stephen Shoemaker

August 19, 2018

I prepared this summer's set of sermons in response to your suggestions about what you'd like me to preach on. Little did I know that this one would follow last week's discussion. Phyllis Munson reminded us of the danger of labels. I was reminded of a story of a cattle rancher in Texas who had a large ranch. A man asked him the name of his ranch. He said, "It's the Crooked Creed, Bent Arrow, Triple B, Ten Hens, Ragged Ridge, Circle A ranch." The man replied, "Wow, you must have a lot of cattle!" The rancher replied, "No, not many survive the branding."

Yes, labels can get in the way of understanding. With that caution in mind let us proceed. "The Politics of God and the Freedom of the Pulpit.

I

Dare we talk about God and politics in the same breath? It could lead to fanaticism: "God is on my side!" The word "politics" can leave a sour taste in our mouths. It feels like unending contentiousness. But the word in its root meaning is about the arrangement of a city so that all the citizens are well served.

It is *partisan* politics, party politics that can lead to unending contentiousness. Paul said that one of the “works of the flesh” is “party spirit”—which does not mean being a “party animal” but dividing up into contentious parties, whether in church or out of church. Partisan politics in church is a bad idea.

But I wish to make a case for God having a stake in the politics of a nation or community. I believe a careful reading of Scripture suggests so. There is public morality, not just private morality.

When God called Moses to free the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt he went to Pharaoh and said: “My God has sent me to say, “Let my people go!” Pharaoh could have said, may well have thought: “Yours is a strange god. God has nothing to do with politics.”

The most often repeated command in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, is to care for the orphan, widow and stranger, or immigrant, that is, the most vulnerable in society, the ones Jesus called the “least of these”, the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and prisoners.

Isaiah the prophet said:

Woe to those who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people from their right... (Isaiah 10:1-2)

We're talking about politics here. I could quote such passages all day.

Jeremiah the prophet said in today's text:

Go down to the palace of the King and declare, "Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the orphan or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

When Jesus turned over the tables in the temple he was protesting the corruption of religious and political leader and the grave injustice in the land. He quoted this same Jeremiah when he said, "You have made it a den of thieves." This incident in the temple led directly to his death at the hands of Rome.

The extraordinary Franciscan spiritual writer Richard Rohr has a daily blog. Once in awhile he addresses politics because in his mind everything is connected: the spiritual and the political. He wrote in a recent blog:

Most of the negative feedback I receive is “Don’t get political.” Yet how can I read the Bible and stay out of politics? Again and again (approximately 2,000 times!) Scripture calls for justice for the poor.

There are two ways to follow God’s commands here: private, personal care for the poor, and public action on behalf of the poor.

II

I believe it is idolatrous to identify God with one political party. But I also believe there are some *policies* which are closer to God’s will for the nation than others.

Abraham Lincoln said it well:

Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side.

The movements led by Rev. Barber, the Moral Monday movement and the Poor People’s Campaign are right to frame their concerns as moral concerns which transcend political parties. The nation’s care for the poor and vulnerable, the cause of racial justice and equality for women are moral concerns which reflect Biblical values.

How we get there is a crucial question. I have generally thought that Republicans and Democrats share the goal of serving the common good but differ on the *way* to get there. Democrats favor “equality” Republicans favor “freedom”. Democrats favor large government, Republicans smaller government. They provide a check on each other so that we not go too far right or too far left. I hope that is the case and that the center will hold. America needs more Flaming Moderates!

III

In Philippians 1:27 Paul writes “Let your manner of life, your *politeusthe*, your politics be worthy of the gospel of Christ.” How can our politics be worthy of the gospel of Christ? Here are some suggestions.

First, as best you can try to align your politics with the values of God, justice, mercy and peace.

Second, recognize that the political realm is not the ultimate realm. The ultimate realm is the realm of the Spirit. So we hold more loosely our political identities because our first allegiance is to Christ. Our political commitments are important, but not the most important thing. Will Campbell once wrote an essay entitled “Politics as Baal”, that is making an idol out of politics.

Third, to be completely non-political is to endorse the way things are. But what if the way things are is injurious to many people? Does God want us to be oblivious to the suffering of others, sufferings which need *political* solutions?

Fourth, in bad times we are called to challenge the powers that be and those in charge. As Peter and the apostles said to the authorities who arrested them: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Fifth, work for civility in political discussion. There has been a terrible coarsening in our public discourse of late. I remember a day when a senator would say, “I respectfully disagree with the honorable senator from Montana.” Attack ads rule the day in our political discourse. We must not let them rule our hearts.

Sixth, love your political opponent with your mind, that is seek to understand why they think the way they do. If you’re a Republican take a Democrat to lunch; if you’re a Democrat take a Republican to lunch. Listen more than you talk.

Seventh, the prophet Micah said, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” We sing that verse together every communion Sunday.

Yes, we are to work to help our nation do justice and love mercy. And it would help if we do so as those who walk humbly with our God. I heard Bill Clinton say once—I hope you don't take offense at my quoting him—that the most important verse in the Bible to him politically was Paul's word in I Corinthians 13: "For now we see through a glass darkly... now I know in part." An important word for both politicians and preachers.

IV

Last I want to talk about the "freedom of the pulpit." Let me put on my interim pastor hat. This is the freedom the congregation gives the minister to preach whatever he or she feels led by God's spirit to say. A number of you came to me when I first became your interim pastor and said, "Challenge us." This cannot happen without the congregation's affirmation of the freedom of the pulpit.

As the saying goes, "Preachers are called to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." The Bible does both. Sometimes we need to be comforted; other times we need the comfortable parts of ourselves to be challenged. Spiritually, theologically, politically, morally.

A story. Myers Park Baptist Church has as part of its written down set of core values "the freedom of the pulpit." Here is one example of how it helped.

In 1979 the women of the church invited Carter Heyward to preach. She had grown up in Charlotte and was one of the thirteen women first ordained to be priests in the Episcopal Church. But between the time she was invited and the time she was to come, she came out very publically as a lesbian. This caused great consternation among the congregation's members. There ensued a long and painful deacon's meeting about whether to sustain her invitation. They could not agree on homosexuality. This was 1979! But finally they resolved the issue by appealing to a core value, the freedom of the pulpit. She preached, and it was an important moment of growth for the congregation. When in conflict it helps to have a higher value that you can agree on.

I have preached on political issues a handful of times in these two years. For some that was too much, for others too little. But I have felt the freedom to preach as I felt God leading me. On the weekend of President Trump's Inauguration I preached a sermon about his Presidency. It was a lament over what I feared happening to the Presidency and to the nation. It was a grief response, a cry in the night. It was helpful to some, upsetting to others. Some of you loved it; others endured it. I had my own misgivings about it. Preaching can be risky business. But I trusted you had as a core value the freedom of the pulpit.

I would hope you affirm this as a core value as you call your new pastor. I do not think you want the minister simply to reflect the thinking of the

congregation. David Comer told me he once preached a controversial sermon and had some blowback. He told the congregation that he was not trying to get the congregation to think like him, but simply to *think*.

Stanley Hauerwas, Duke theologian, says that when a congregation ordains a minister it is saying: “Tell us the truth”, the truth as best you can know it, whether it is welcome or not. I think that is what Paul was saying when he wrote, “Preach the gospel in season and out of season.”

The whole gospel of Christ is both a personal gospel and a social gospel, personal transformation and social transformation. Both are crucial. The famous missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones wrote: “The personal gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body. The social gospel without a personal gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse.” Let us declare, as Paul put it, “the whole counsel” of God.

Riverside Church in New York City is one of the great churches in the nation and world. Its current pastor is Amy Butler. A few months ago she was in the receiving line after church when she fainted. It was due to extreme exhaustion, and she took a little time off to recuperate. Recently she has written about how hard it is to be a pastor in these divisive times. Church is harder.

Relationships are strained. We should take extra care to be gentle with one another in such times.

A gift you could give the new pastor is the assurance that the pulpit is free. Sometimes what the preacher feels is the Spirit is indigestion. All sermons are not equally inspired, but the freedom of the pulpit is a gift to the preacher and the church in our search together for God and what is true and right.