

“PIETISTS, PRIESTS, AND PROPHETS”

Jeremiah 2:1-9; Luke 4:16-21

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Each year I set aside at least one week for continuing education as a pastor. You as a church make a substantial investment in sending me to the events I choose to attend, so I always try to give you a proper “bang for your buck” by reporting to you directly on what I have learned.

In late May I participated in a week-long conference on preaching in Washington, D.C. No doubt this event was held in our nation’s capital because the conference theme was “Preaching and Politics.” The speakers reflected on the current “State of the Union” and what the Church should have to say about it. Today is the Sunday before our country’s birthday, and this seems like a fitting time to share with you something of what I took away from those five days.

For starters, I was reminded that politics may be the last thing you want to hear about in a Sunday sermon! You may think a lot about politics and have definite views on politics, but you may rarely talk about politics except to those with whom you are guaranteed to agree. And many of you don’t expect or desire to hear about politics from a church pulpit. This is all the more true because the adjectives most often used to describe politics today are “dirty,” “divisive,” “polarized,” and “poisonous.” The Church, by contrast, places a premium on peace, love, harmony, and unity. It would seem that the quickest way to turn a Sunday School class into a snake pit or a worship service into a war zone is to get involved in a discussion about politics!

And yet, the conference I attended had as its subject matter “Preaching and Politics.” I’ll come right out and tell you here at the outset: the leaders of this event were of one mind that the Church is called to speak and act on political issues, and that preachers should be leading the way. However, to understand what these conference leaders were really advocating, you and I need to take a little trip down memory lane. During biblical times and in all times since, the relationship between faith and politics has been defined in three different ways.

First, there are those who have insisted that faith and politics should never mix. Social and political issues are simply not appropriate subject matter in a church; preachers should focus their message only on purely “religious” topics like sin, salvation, and spirituality. I call these folks “Pietists” because they believe the essence of the life of faith is a life of personal piety. Faith is about the solitary individual and his or her relationship with God; it’s about worship and prayer; it’s about spiritual discipline and private morality. In fact, the word “private” accurately sums up this point of view. For the Pietist, faith is strictly a private matter and has nothing to do with the public realm. What happens in society and in the arena of politics is not the church’s business.

As we survey the Bible, we see examples of this stance in both ancient Israel and in the early Church; and, to be honest, the picture we get is not a pretty one. The typical scenario is that individuals and groups become fixated on religious rules and rituals aimed at drawing them closer to God; but, in the process, they ignore the suffering of people around them and look the

other way when their political rulers exploit those who are already marginalized. This stance is also reflected in more recent times. I know of churches that, on the one hand, are fervent in their worship of God and their preaching of personal salvation, but on the other hand, refuse to confront the unjust structures of society and exclude worshipers who are different in appearance or lifestyle. Such churches fail to see the contradiction in their practices because, after all, faith and politics should never mix.

The problem that Pietists have is that they want to “preach Jesus,” but they don’t want to preach what Jesus himself preached! Both the Old and New Testaments picture the life of faith as both vertical and horizontal. The Great Commandment calls us to love God and to love our neighbors; and loving our neighbors necessarily includes not only “random acts of kindness” but also organized social action. Our spiritual forebear John Wesley envisioned the Christian life as a combination of “personal holiness” and “social holiness”; and the pursuit of social holiness inevitably involves us, as it did Wesley, in the messy world of politics. Wesley himself joined forces with a Member of Parliament, William Wilberforce, to oppose the slave trade in 18th Century England. The founder of Methodism understood that when the Church remains silent about the conditions of society and the operations of politics, both society and politics are certain to be corrupted.

This brings us to the second way in which faith and politics have been related over the centuries. Here, faith and politics are not separated; they are clearly and deliberately mixed, but they are mixed in a peculiar way. What happens is that political parties and politicians actively seek the endorsement of faith communities, and these faith communities readily comply. In other words, religious institutions and their leaders become directly immersed in partisan politics, supporting specific candidates or those already in power.

I’m calling these folks “Priests,” because this pattern is typified by the temple priests in ancient Israel. The kings of Israel seek the support of the religious establishment, and the clergy nearly always offer the monarchs their unqualified backing. The priests tell the kings exactly what they want to hear, and the kings pour money into the temple treasury. “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.” Of course, the big loser in this arrangement is the covenant of faith and obedience between Israel and God. The priests wind up in the hip pocket of the kings, unable to keep a critical distance and challenge the idolatry, immorality, and injustice of Israel’s rulers.

In today’s Old Testament reading, Jeremiah recounts how Israel has forsaken her covenant with Yahweh, and the prophet holds the priests directly responsible. He says that when the nation “defiled [God’s] land, and made [God’s] heritage an abomination, the priests did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who handle the law did not know [God]” (Jeremiah 2:7b-8a). Well, it should come as no surprise that the priests don’t know God, because their primary allegiance is to the king. Faith and politics form an alliance, but it turns out to be an unholy alliance.

We see this pattern today when religious leaders and institutions become strange bedfellows with partisan politicians. And so, a conservative white pastor in Texas endorses the Republican candidate for president. A liberal black pastor in Harlem endorses the Democratic candidate for president. Both of these pastors equate authentic Christianity with the agenda of

one party or the other. Either way, it's the same phenomenon: faith and politics get thoroughly mixed, and the mix is a witch's brew.

This brings us to the third way in which faith and politics have been related throughout history. It happens to be the way advocated by the speakers at the conference I attended in Washington, D.C.; it is the way embraced by the United Methodist Church; and it is the way I want to commend to you this morning. According to this view, faith and politics should not be completely separated; they should have some relationship to one another because they have mutual interests and concerns.

Remember that politics is not just drum-beating for specific candidates; it is also about striving for specific policies which affect people's lives, policies which either promote or undermine the common good. Politics deals with issues such as civil rights, economic justice, health care, crime and punishment, military power, peacemaking, public safety, abortion, and homosexuality. These issues arise not just within the sphere of government; many of them are mentioned repeatedly in the Bible and should be front and center in the mind of the Church. The Church's responsibility is to influence public policy in a way that reflects biblical teaching and the mind and spirit of Christ. We are neither a red Church nor a blue Church, we are Christ's Church!

I refer to those who take this stance as "Prophets," because they relate to politics as the biblical prophets do. Of course, the prophets of ancient Israel aren't all on the same page. Jeremiah reminds us that some of Israel's prophets "prophesied by Baal" (2:8b); that is, they endorse the false gods worshiped by Israel's unfaithful kings and citizens. These prophets are actually more like the temple priests, always eager to do the king's bidding. By contrast, true prophets like Jeremiah resist the temptation to do what is popular or simply tow the party line. They keep enough critical distance to challenge the nation's government and to advocate for more just policies, not because they are politically liberal or conservative, but because they are seeking to proclaim and enact the will of God.

Jesus of Nazareth stands in the long line of these true prophets. He not only calls individuals to repentance and faith – what John Wesley referred to as "personal holiness." Jesus also calls for changes in the way people treat one another and in the way society is stacked against those who are down and out – what Wesley termed "social holiness."

According to Luke, at the outset of Jesus' public ministry Jesus delivers an inaugural address outlining the agenda for his kingdom mission. This is not a partisan political speech, taking sides for or against the Roman emperor or the Jewish king. But it has everything to do with social and political policy. Listen to this: "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" (Luke 4:18-19). This is a direct quote from the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus takes these words as his own marching orders. No, Jesus is not a political revolutionary; he comes to establish a spiritual kingdom, not a new form of temporal government. He never runs for public office or affiliates with a political party. But his agenda is clearly political in the sense that he is calling for social reform, for policies and behaviors which promote "liberty and justice for all."

Friends, it is my conviction that faith and politics must maintain certain boundaries between them, but at the same time they also must be closely related. The best way for the Church to relate to politics is to assume the stance of a Prophet – to be fully involved in the public sector, but to keep a critical distance so that we are guided by the Scriptures and not by a partisan political philosophy, so that we can say “No” as well as “Yes” to the policies of our government.

If you’re seeking a contemporary role model for a Prophet, I want to place in nomination our own Bishop in the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. On June 22, Bishop Thomas Bickerton sent out a letter to the clergy and lay members of our Conference. It was a message opposing the U.S. government policy which has separated migrant parents from their children at our country’s borders. The Bishop appealed in part to humanitarian concerns, noting the simple fact that “children need to be with their parents and parents need to be with their children.” But he also referenced the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, which have a lot to say about welcoming the stranger and caring for “the least of these.” And then at one point in his letter, the Bishop added this: “We should be proud that we are a part of a church that says in its Social Principles, *‘The United Methodist Church recognizes, embraces, and affirms all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of the family of God. We urge society to recognize the gifts, contributions, and struggles of those who are immigrants and to advocate for justice for all.’*”

Friends, we belong to a Church that rejects the view of Pietists that faith is only about saving and nurturing individual souls. We reject the stance of Priests who allow themselves to become pawns of selfish politicians. Instead, we embrace the role of Prophets who speak out on ethical and social issues which overlap with the world of politics.

A few months ago, a member of our church told me he had heard another member take issue with one particular aspect of my preaching. Only one?! I can identify several aspects of my preaching where there is room for improvement. For one thing, my sermons need to be shorter on Communion Sundays – guilty as charged! In any case, I relate this recent conversation not to embarrass or shame either church member, much less to strike a defensive posture for myself. But this exchange is worth reporting. This one member quoted the other member as saying, “John preaches too much about politics.” And I replied, “Good! At least I know this person has been listening to my sermons.”