

GIVING UP POLITICAL IDOLATRY FOR LENT

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Romans 13:1-7 NRSV

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Luke 13:31-35 NRSV

I hope you're ready, because this morning I am about to step out on a rickety limb. You may have gathered from my sermon title that I am going to be talking about politics. There's no better way for a minister to alienate him- or herself from others than to start talking about politics from the pulpit. So why would I do it? Why would I, a new minister who has only been at his church for a few weeks, risk walking out on that limb and possibly sawing it off behind him? Well, because it's Lent, that's why. If we're going to follow Jesus on to Jerusalem and Good Friday, then we must face along with him those in political power who view him as at best an inconvenience and at worst a threat.

I recall hearing that there are two things you should not talk about in polite company: sports and politics. The only thing that generates more passion than rivalries between

sports teams is partisan politics. Fed by relentless media companies that make money off of propagating the idea that each and every complicated issue of our time can be boiled down to only two viewpoints (Democratic or Republican), our national dialogue is anything but productive. If you hang around me for any small amount of time, you can probably guess my own political preferences, but I do want you to take note of the bumper sticker on the red minivan my family drives around town. It reads: “God is not a Republican...or a Democrat.” Above all, when we talk about politics in church we need to remember that the God we worship is greater than the political parties we so passionately claim. We may offer our allegiance to a particular party and to America itself, but as Christians our first allegiance is always to the God we worship. God claims no party membership and is the God of all people not just Americans.

As long as there have been politics and religion, humans have tried to mix the two together. One of the great ways to rally support for your agenda is to claim that God is on your side, because after all, who doesn't want to be on the side of God? The problem with making this move is that when we attempt to make God a partisan player we are making God into our image instead of acknowledging that we are made in God's image. We commit idolatry when we prioritize our politics above God. This has been especially true in our nation's history. Ours is a religious nation and the rhetoric of politicians of every party has often dripped with religious imagery.¹ (You'll notice I said “religious nation” not “Christian nation”. I don't believe a nation-state can make a profession of faith in Christ; only people can do that.) I do believe, however, that a new level of this mixing of politics and religion has been reached in recent years, where the language of the Gospel has been manipulated for political gain.

In his 2003 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush made the following remarks while pushing his “faith-based initiative”: “There is power—wonder-working power—in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.”² It was an interesting choice of words; an allusion that went over the heads of many in his audience. It struck a chord with me, because I grew up singing some of those words on Sunday mornings. Does anybody recognize the phrase “there is power, wonder-working power...”? It comes from the hymn “Power in the Blood” and the full refrain says, “There is power, power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb.” The “Lamb” in question is Jesus Christ, and the “wonder-working power” is the eternal salvation offered through Christ's death on the cross. Now, I'm proud to be an American (most days) and I do believe that a lot of good occurs through the work of proud Americans, but I would never want to go so far as to claim it in any way equals the saving power of Christ.

Similarly, a few months earlier, on the one-year anniversary of September 11, President Bush and his speech writers made another use of Christian imagery for political purposes. Standing on Liberty Island in New York Harbor, with the fractured skyline of Manhattan behind him, President Bush said the following:

Ours is the cause of human dignity; freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace. This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it.³

Did you recognize the phrase “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it”? It is a paraphrase of John 1:5 which declares that Jesus is the “light of the world.” In this speech, Bush declares that the “hope of all mankind” is America, or at least the democratic ideals of America. Furthermore, he speaks of America as the light of the world in language scripture reserves for Christ. I just don’t see how you can go much further in making an idol out of America than is done in that speech. However highly one may think of America and the freedoms it champions, people of faith cannot afford to mistake the power and hope of God with what America has to offer. Our national greatness pales in comparison to the greatness of God. Yet, there was no great hue and cry by people of faith about this speech.

The irony was apparently lost on President Bush and his speechwriters that he was claiming God was on the side of America—even conflating America and God—in response to terrorists that claimed God was on their side. The September 11 hijackers believed God was operating through them when they flew planes full of innocent people into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. One might think that after seeing Al Qaeda make claims as to being the instruments of God that we Americans might at least be a little leery of making the same claim about ourselves. Furthermore, the remarks about the “wonder-working power” of the American people were made a short time before America went to war in Iraq. These claims and counter-claims about God’s favor have contributed to the idea that we are in the midst of a “clash of civilizations” and a Christian nation at war with Islam.

When I came to St. Joseph last September to interview for the position of minister here, I picked up a copy of the *News-Press*. I scanned it looking for some idea of what the community was like and came to the letters to the editor. One letter caught my eye, because its author claimed that America should wake up and realize that we are at war with Islam. I swallowed hard and wondered exactly what I was getting into by moving here. Although I don’t think that letter is necessarily reflective of St. Joseph as a whole, I

do think that the concept that our “War on Terror” is a religious struggle between the forces of good (us) and evil (anybody we think is against us) happens to be widespread not only here but around the country. If we have any humility as people of faith who believe that all human beings are sinners, we cannot afford to think this way. I wonder if the guy that wrote that letter to the editor has ever even met a Muslim. I have and count some as friends, and they are more “Christ-like” in their desire for peace and respect than that guy.

This confusion of nationalism with divine providence is not new, nor is it uniquely American, but we Americans just don’t seem to be able to talk politics without reaching into the religious realm for justification of our policies and programs. So far in this sermon, I have used two examples from President Bush’s speeches. If you will recall, at the beginning, I said that I believe God is not a Republican or a Democrat. I mentioned these two examples, because he is the president and his rhetoric has dominated the discourse in recent years. Let’s be honest, however, and admit that if it would gain them the presidency, the Democratic Party would not be above such tactics. Although Republicans, since the successful campaign of Ronald Reagan in 1980, have become masters of manipulating religion for their own aims, Democrats have been trying to catch up. Despite John Kerry’s pitiful attempts to quote scripture in 2004 (he quotes scripture about as well as he tells jokes), a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* spoke about the “narrowing of the religion gap” between Democrats and Republicans.⁴ It’s possible that some of the Democratic hopefuls could be more adept at appealing to religious voters than their Republican counterparts. I’m sure the next few years will give us plenty of egregious examples of political idolatry from both parties.

Let me return to my first question of the sermon: Why talk about the mixing of religion and politics on Sunday morning? Because on the second Sunday in Lent, we find Jesus on the road to Jerusalem—the road to Good Friday—the road to his suffering and death—and he is confronted by the fact that his mission bumps right up against political powers. Indeed, one of the governmental powers that he would face on his last night, Herod Antipas, the puppet-ruler of Rome,⁵ wants to kill him. Jesus was drawing crowds to hear him speak. Dictators and despots hate crowds, because they are hard to control. Jesus was speaking of the Kingdom of God rather than loyalty to an earthly king or emperor. People were speaking of Jesus as the Messiah, which in addition to being a religious title was a political title in first century Palestine. Jesus was a threat to the political powers of his day, and he remains a threat to anyone in power today.

We who are readers of Luke’s Gospel should not be surprised that Jesus is a threat to the mighty and powerful. In the first chapter of this Gospel, when Mary, the mother of Jesus,

sang about the power of God at work in her life and in her womb, her words included “he has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”⁶ Also, early in his ministry, Jesus reads as his mission statement a passage from Isaiah that says:

“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).

All of the things Jesus mentioned on that day in his hometown have political consequences especially that stuff about releasing captives and freeing the oppressed. We water his words down and spiritualize them, but Jesus’ call for faithful people to pursue justice and serve others cannot help but impact the politics of his day and ours.

To be on the road to the cross with Jesus IS to be ruffling the feathers of the powers that be. We must realize that we may be proud citizens of our country and grateful for the freedoms we possess in this nation, but nonetheless our first allegiance is to Christ above all. Because we believe that human beings are sinful and capable of prideful self-deception in regards to their own motives, we must therefore be appropriately suspicious of any human institution—government, religious or commercial, especially when they use religion to push their agenda or product. Throwing up our arms and checking out of society is not an option—at least not if we wish to follow Jesus. Instead we take part in society and in politics, but we must constantly double-check our motives and our methods. .

Yet, all this talk about refusing to let our faith be co-opted by political parties and operating with a healthy suspicion of governments and politicians can make a good American citizen uncomfortable. Isn’t a part of being a good Christian being a good citizen? If you’ve been around church for a while, you may recall that there are places in the Bible that teach Christians to be obedient to the state. The passage read this morning from Romans 13 is often used in this regard.

Paul wrote, “whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” It seems pretty straightforward that if we take this passage by itself, then Christians should obey their governments or face God’s judgment. Or at least that is the way it has often been interpreted. This passage has been used to promote the “divine right of kings” and submission to authorities throughout Western history. Yet, as Americans, we should at least consider that at the heart of our national narrative is the American Revolution where we rebelled against an earthly king. I bet supporters of King

George liked to quote this passage of scripture. That's the way it often goes with citing scripture. When it suits our cause, we quote one passage (like Romans 13), but when it doesn't we ignore passages that disagree with us.

The example of the American Revolution raises the question of what are we to do with passages like this one when the ruler is unjust or even dictatorial. What about the Nazi government? Was it instituted by God? What about Stalinist Russia? What about governments like that in Burma or Sudan which commit atrocities against their own people? What about the fugitive slave laws of our nation's history? What about Jim Crow laws? What about McCarthyism or the abuses of power in the Watergate era? These verses from Romans 13 work in a universal sense when we like our government or when we want submission to government, but they do not work in a universal sense when we consider the sad fact that every human government at one time or another abuses the power it possesses

The fact remains that not even Paul followed his own words in Romans 13. He ran afoul of the Roman authorities and was executed by Rome. Just like Jesus, the message of God's love for powerless people was deemed a political threat. The same thing happened to many Christians before the time of Constantine. They faced persecution from their government because they refused to serve in the Roman army and took in elements of society considered undesirable and even seditious. Similarly, throughout history Christians who stand as examples of faith are known to us as such because they bravely stood up to the powers that be. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Desmond Tutu are just a few of the Christians who did not submit to governmental powers that promoted racism and oppression.

It seems to me that there is no getting around the fact that following Jesus may very well lead a believer to cross the politically powerful. So I think if we are to properly understand Paul's words in Romans 13, then we cannot apply it to every government in every place and time. I agree with the Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, who wrote about this passage:

The immediate concrete meaning of this text for the Christian Jews in Rome, in the face of official anti-Semitism and the rising arbitrariness of the Imperial regime, is to call them away from any notion of revolution or insubordination. The call is to a nonresistant attitude toward a tyrannical government. This is the immediate and concrete meaning of the text; how strange then to make it the classic proof for the duty of the Christian life.⁷

Paul was writing to a specific community and using his persuasive powers to make a point regarding a crisis in the community.⁸ Rather than making an argument for all Christians in all times, Paul is trying to persuade Christians in Rome to stay out of trouble. They represented the young movement to the powers in Rome, and their actions could have a devastating effect upon believers throughout the empire. Perhaps this passage is applicable for some Christians today, but we must be careful how we lift this passage from its historical context into our own.

As we draw near to another Presidential race that will inevitably draw the usual volleys in the so-called “culture wars”, I believe we are called as Christians to resist the temptation to say that God is on the side of one candidate or another, one party or another, one platform or another. Instead, we are called to resist the idolatry that places a person, party or policy in the place of God, in terms of our allegiance or as a declaration of righteousness and truth. We must also resist the efforts of any and all who use religion and scripture to silence dissent in the name of justice and concern for those who have no political powers. After all, if Christians had stayed out of politics, there would have been no abolitionist movement, women’s suffragist movement or civil rights movement—all of which had Christians at the center of their fights for justice.

Politics inevitably involves compromise, but the Gospel does not compromise, at least not in terms of the sacrificial love exhibited by Jesus—love that involved suffering for others. One could say that in our consumerist, convenience-oriented society, the role of government is to spare its people from making sacrifices and certainly to spare them from suffering—at least those who vote and wield political power. The Gospel, by contrast, demands of disciples that we sacrifice our own comfort and convenience for the sake of others, to the point that we are willing to suffer to demonstrate our love for those who have no voice in society.

We are called to engage political leaders and parties in terms of what they are or are not doing for the least powerful. When political candidates of whatever party come around, people of faith must be there to remind them of God’s demands of justice for those who are unable to write the big checks at expensive political fundraisers. We are called to a type of resistance against a political system, supported by the media and corporate interests, that cares only for the powerful and not for the powerless. It is a type of resistance that our church has already undertaken, whether we realize it or not.

Each year we lead the Royal Family Kids Camp for foster care children. Would this camp even be necessary if people in political power gave more than a passing thought to the thousands of children in foster care across this country? By caring for these children,

we are saying to a culture that does not care about them, they are worth something, because God created them and Jesus suffered for them. Any government that fails to see this is in need of correction.

Each year a group from our church travels to Jamaica to do medical mission work for people far from the luxurious tourist spots. Would these trips be necessary if the government of Jamaica put its efforts towards caring for these people? Perhaps even more importantly, would these trips be necessary if *our* government was interested in trade policies that benefited the poorest of our hemisphere as well as America? To care for these people is to work against a complex history of government corruption, colonialism and racism. It is to declare that these people are worth something, because God created them and Jesus suffered for them. Any government that fails to see this is in need of correction.

Each month members of our church go to work at the Open Door Food Kitchen here in St. Joseph. Would this be necessary if our local, state and national governments even cared about people who have no political clout and who do not write campaign contributions? Don't look for a candidate to show up at a food kitchen except for a photo-op around Thanksgiving. Our role as Christians is to declare to people of power that each person served at the Open Door is worth something because God created them and Jesus suffered for them. Any government that fails to see this is in need of correction.

Above parties, above policies, above candidates, above politics, as Christians, our allegiance must be above all Jesus Christ. Such allegiance demands that we commit ourselves to the grace-filled, sacrificial work of compassion, no matter what government we happen to live under. Amen.

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¹ For an interesting collection of essays on the use of the Bible in American politics, see the collection of essays in *The Bible in American Law, Politics, and Political Rhetoric*, Edited by James Turner Johnson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

² <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>

³ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020911-3.html>

⁴ Gary Rosen, "Narrowing the Religion Gap?" *The New York Times Magazine*, February 18, 2007.

⁵ Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great. The latter was the vassal king of Judea around the time of Jesus' birth and was known for brutally putting down threats to his rule. (See Matthew 2:13-18.) Once the Romans did away with the office of king and installed a governor, the next in line for the throne, Herod Antipas, was demoted to the job of Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Even still, in his own jurisdiction he apparently had the power of life and death, as in the case of the execution of John the Baptist.

⁶ Only a few verses later with this song still in our heads, we read of Herod's appointment as Tetrarch (Luke 3:1).

⁷ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998): 202-203.

⁸ As is the case on occasion in Paul's letters, his reasoning is a reach at times. I have to believe that we as modern readers have to give Paul a break and realize that if he had known his writings would be immortalized for all time as scripture and his specific and contextual arguments would be used to justify Christian ethics over millennia and around the world, he might have been a bit more careful or expansive.