

Today I am beginning a sermon series on Faith, Ethics and Politics, and while this seemed like a really great idea back in July, I have thought since then that I must have had a serious lapse in judgement to want to take on such a potentially divisive subject. Now you know that if you are a socially sensitive person there are two things you simply should never talk about in mixed company. What are they? Religion and politics. And today I am going to talk about both of them. Of course, I talk about religion every week, but rarely politics. And yet I felt that it is important for me to do so, because Jesus was deeply engaged in the political reality of his time, and our Christian faith calls us to similarly engage in the public arena as we seek to live out the teachings of Jesus.

As our Scripture lesson demonstrates, when Jesus sent the 12 disciples out into the world he sent them with a charge: go as sheep among wolves, to be as wise as snakes, yet as inoffensive as doves. He told them that it would not be easy for them, that it would be hazardous work witnessing these values out in the world, and they would be persecuted. But he wanted them to continue his mission of seeking the lost, loving the lonely, helping the sick and forgotten. Any one who would promote the counter cultural values of our faith in the world will be persecuted and misunderstood. It has always been so.

Now, my intention in preaching these sermons is **not** to persuade you to take one position or another, or to vote for one person over another. You are intelligent people and you undoubtedly have that already figured out for yourselves. Rather, my intention is to explore with you the ways that our faith calls us to become involved as we seek to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus. To explore how we can be light and hope in this turbulent time. This is vitally important, particularly when there are so many pressing issues facing our country and world. I hope to explore this question: How do good hearted people of faith live out their principles in a time such as this? How do we work together for the common good even when we do not agree about the solutions or strategies? Someone once said: "Our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience to get involved in the political process."

Now some people of faith view politics as inherently messy and unethical. Their view is that all politicians are corrupt, and to get ahead in politics you must sell out your core values. Therefore, politics should be shunned by honest and upright people of faith. Besides, it really doesn't matter anyway; it is all controlled by special interests and people with lots of money.

In stark contrast to that perspective, we have fundamentalist groups like the Moral Majority from several years back, who feel Christians are required to become politically involved in a very specific way. They presume to speak for all Christians, pronouncing their views as the correct Christian position on a variety of issues. So we have two extremes--apathetic on one side and authoritarian on the other. I advocate a middle way as we consider politics in light of Christian social ethics, in a manner that is sensitive and appropriate in a pluralistic democracy.

But first, let's examine what faith and politics mean. Faith essentially describes our core values or beliefs. Beliefs about right or wrong, good and evil, just and unjust, what it means to be human and the nature of ultimate reality. We cannot compartmentalize our life from our faith because our core values drive our opinions, perceptions and behavior. Politics means, according to Harold Laswell, "The process for determining who gets what, when and how." Politics is about power and control and the distribution of resources. Gore Vidal studied the etymology of the word politics and came up with this definition: Politics comes from the word "poly" meaning many, and "tics" meaning blood sucking insects.

Our faith, or core beliefs determine our politics. And our particular faith, Christianity directs us to approach these matters with a certain world view, a certain perspective and set of concerns. Some would say that people should never inject their personal religious beliefs into public policy debates, but I think that is virtually impossible. None of us can leave our faith at the door when considering the most pressing issues of our time—poverty, immigration, abortion, stem cell research, the environment, health care, war, national security. Our faith and values profoundly determine how we view such things.

However, in a country that upholds the separation of church and state, we have to be careful about how we apply our faith to the political realm. It cannot be in a way that is heavy handed, offensive or insensitive. All too often in human history faith has been used as a justification for evil or even murder. I think of suicide bombers who believed God wanted them to blow themselves and everyone around them up for their cause. During the Crusades and Inquisition many innocent people were tortured or killed in the name of God. In Nazi Germany God's name was invoked to justify the Holocaust. In the name of Mohammed, Jesus, and every other spiritual leader who has ever lived, innocent people have suffered and died. So we have to be careful in assuming a position of moral superiority or absolute righteousness with regard to our faith.

Additionally, people of faith should beware of the tendency to oversimplify the issues, accompanied by the inability to consider different perspectives. This tendency to frame issues as either good or bad, black or white can be extremely dangerous. That is where the advice of Jesus comes in: “Be as wise as serpents, gentle as doves.” The world does not need more unthinking religious zealots. I have been greatly informed by reading the recent book by Rev. Adam Hamilton entitled Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White. It is a book that our men’s breakfast group has been studying, and the book that will be used in a 4 week class of the same name which begins today in the Parlor. Rev. Hamilton addresses this human tendency to search for simplistic solutions to complex problems, and nowhere is that more evident than in the political arena. We long for easy answers and yet most of the issues in the world today contain subtleties, nuances and complexities. Too often Christians have been viewed as those who oversimplify everything, and then stamp their positions as the will of God. Adam Hamilton writes, “Too often faith has been used by Christian politicians to further a particular agenda, and in the minds of many nonreligious people in America, Christianity is not associated with love, grace or justice, but with a particular view of homosexuality, or abortion, or a seemingly absurd and anti-intellectual view of human origins. Christians have, in their political involvement, acted to divide our nation rather than serve as the balm that can heal it.” (*Seeing Gray*, p. xv)

So, how can the followers of Jesus work to be a healing force in our nation? How can we lovingly engage those with whom we disagree? How can we rise above the animosity, name calling and ugliness of partisan politics to work together for the common good? Most important of all, How can we survive the next 8 weeks of this campaign without losing our minds? I would be so proud if Christians could take the lead on being civil and respectful of differences. I would be so proud if Christians could frame the issues which separate and divide us in light of the compassion and unconditional love of Jesus Christ. I would love it if Christians could be on the forefront of fighting poverty, injustice, and human suffering all over this world. As Jesus promised the disciples, it won’t be easy, we will be attacked and judged for engaging the powers and principalities of this world. But it is essential that we do so.

If politics is the process of determining who gets what, when, and how, then God does have a huge stake in such matters. The God who sent the Old Testament prophets to speak up to injustice, the God who became human in Christ to seek the lost, and lonely and forgotten, that God cares deeply about these things. And if our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience to get involved in the political process, then we have a moral obligation

to make sure these things are addressed in an intelligent manner.

Many people throughout history believed that democracy would never work. Aristotle, Plato and others suspected democracy would be a disaster primarily because people were not smart enough to make it work. They would never take the time to learn about the issues, they could not be trusted to govern themselves. Even the founders of this country knew that democracy was a very risky experiment. That is why they built in some safeguards like the electoral college, or the fact that until 1914 we did not get to elect our own Senators, they were appointed by their state Legislatures. It has been long understood that if thoughtful people of conscience did not get involved in the political process, then democracy could never function. But it is still a risky and fragile undertaking.

So today I want to urge you, no matter what your affiliation, to get involved and become informed. Learn about the key issues facing our country. Don't just take your opinions from everyone else, or from what you hear on TV or Talk Radio, try to examine the issues as critically and thoughtfully as you can. Engage someone with whom you disagree, and try to listen and learn from them. Finally, consider what God would want for our nation and our world. Of course nobody can speak for God, only Jesus would presume to do that. But we do have an idea of God's priorities and values and they have to do with kindness, love, peace, justice.

I had never been to Washington DC until two years ago, when I attended a National Church Conference. One day I took a taxi down to the Mall. I walked for hours, I saw the World War II Memorial. I saw the Vietnam Memorial, and the Lincoln Memorial, and Korean War Memorial, and I was just overwhelmed. I was reminded how those monuments represented countless lives of brave men and women who had parents and some had children, all had hopes, dreams, and plans for their futures. And yet they sacrificed all of it, their very lives for the things that I usually take for granted. As I walked around the Mall in Washington DC on that April day, I resolved that I would try to live in such a way that would make their sacrifice worthwhile. That I would stand up for things that are important, things that I believe greatly matter to God.

This is a truly historic time for our country and our world. We have the power to make a lasting difference for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel he proclaimed. Let us pray:

Gracious God: We do grow weary of politics and the many issues which divide and separate us. Today we pray that you will give us your guidance and grace, and help us to aspire to the very best of our democracy. Help us to work for understanding and healing, help us to honor those who have gone before us, as we consider those who will come after us. Bless and protect those who lead our

country and those who want to lead our country in the years ahead. May they receive your wisdom, guidance and grace. And so may we all. In the name of the living Christ we pray. Amen.

Sources consulted: *Christian Ethics and Political Action* by Donald E. Messer  
*Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* by Adam Hamilton  
*God's Politics* by Jim Wallis