

God's Politics
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A couple of months ago I asked for suggestions for topics to preach on over the summer months. I must admit that you gave me some very challenging and difficult ideas to try and tackle. Fortunately for me, I am not preaching many Sundays this summer --- so I got to really pick and choose which ones I want to attempt.

Three topics really jumped out at me, and I felt that there were things that as followers of Jesus we need to examine in how we best understand and live in relationship to them.

What I had planned to do this morning was look at how we deal with difficult people. I know that this is an important topic because we all have people that we struggle with. I had planned to follow that up with God's final judgment and what that means for us as Christians and how it should affect how we relate to the world. I will get to both of those topics over the next few weeks.

But there was one other topic, that to be honest, I really didn't want to address, but one that I knew that I had to.

On Wednesday (4th of July) as I was heading to the Monon Trail for my daily run, I was listening to NPR. And as is their tradition of the 4th they were reading the US Constitution. It was powerful --- and I knew that I had to address this topic.

The question was asked two different ways, from two very different points of view --- but I want to try to give us a third way of looking at it.

And the question is, how do we, as Christians respond, in this politically divisive environment that we find ourselves.

Before you make assumptions about what I am going to say --- let me frame this conversation this way:

God is not blue or red.

And I doubt that God really cares much about our political parties.

God cares deeply about what we do --- or don't do --- but God is not about the United States political sphere.

One party or the other may want to do their best to claim God --- and God's righteousness --- but claiming God and reality are not the same.

I am a big Civil War buff. My father's family lived just off the battlefield at Shiloh and Nancy's grandparents owned land that was fought over in the battle of Bentonville.

While I was at Duke, I came to realize that two of the best repositories for original Civil War era documents are at Duke University and Indiana University.

I decided to go into the rare books library at Duke and read as many journals that were written by chaplains that I could get my hands on.

I was curious about how they viewed their role in the war
How they understood the role of God (of providence) in the battles and the overall conflict

And what struck me was the similarities between the Chaplains of the North and the South.
Both were convinced of the righteousness of their cause
Both believed that God was on their side
Both believed that God would vindicate them
Both saw the OTHER as evil and vile

It was at this same time that I was serving two little churches in rural North Carolina.

There was nothing extraordinary about these two churches.
One was in town --- the town had 235 residents
The other was a couple of miles outside of town in the open country

Both churches were filled with wonderful and loving people
They were there for me when Stewart got sick and died
They threw me a lifeline that I can never repay

I had a friend --- a fellow student at Duke --- who was a dynamic preacher --- and I invited him to come and preach at my two little churches.

I will never forget his reaction
"Don't you know where you live?"
Yeah - I was living in Western North Carolina in 1985

I had never really thought about racism before --- and I have never seen the fear that I saw in his face before

Needless to say --- he didn't come and preach

I really don't know how they would have responded

Unfortunately, I think I do ----
While they were loving people and some of the "best" Christians I have ever known, when I arrived and was being shown around I was told where "ni**er" town was and that I needed to avoid that area.

How could "good Christians" be so convinced that God had made European folk and people of color so differently?

I still don't have an answer . . .

But what I came to realize, is that many of us confuse our relationship with God with justifying our insecurities, prejudices and misunderstandings.

Or to rationalize our God to meet our political agenda.

Once again I want to state clearly --- Jesus is not Red --- nor is Jesus Blue!

That doesn't make us bad people

But why is it that we are so afraid to talk about our faith and politics?

Why is it so scary --- so frightening --- so hard, to talk about religion or politics?

Jim Wallis, in his provocative book (written in 2005): God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It, writes:

Perhaps these topics are too important, too potentially divisive, or raise the issues of core values and ultimate concerns that make us uncomfortable.

I believe that this may be the most important challenge facing us today

This morning what I am going to attempt to do is set a few parameters, a few guidelines, so that as we begin to dig into some particular topics, we can do so, without getting weighed down by a lot of baggage.

Now I know that this is going to be hard.

Because as soon as some of you heard me begin to speak, you already have some assumptions in your head.

- Some of you have checked out
- some of you think you know what I am going to say
- Some of you think that I have a political party agenda in mind

That leads me to reiterate the first point I want to make:

GOD IS NOT PARTISAN

In other words, God is not a republican or a democrat.

I think that is pretty straight forward.

There are parts of each of our two parties that seem to have values that could be called God affirming and there are parts of each of our two parties that go against the very grain that God is calling us to become.

The second point I want to make is this:

VALUES MATTER

That became very clear in polling that was done following the 2004 Presidential election and again in 2016.

When asked to choose what influenced their vote most, people choose, what we would call one moral value or another.

And that is the first great question that we must ask: **Which values and whose values** are we going to follow?

And today in America, we are a nation that is very divided over this question but I believe that there are core values in which we can find common ground regardless of whether we are Red or Blue.

Core values that come from being a Disciple of Jesus

The third point that I want to make is:

Only people of faith can change the way the wind is blowing in America to help all people hear the prophetic call of the Bible.

You see, I am convinced that neither party gets it right.

For Republicans it's all about sex and life and protecting the perceived American Way

Abortion

Homosexuality/Gay marriage

Immigration

The Democrats seem terrified of God, so they refuse to address the issue.

Both parties' visions are morally and politically incomplete and need to be addressed by people of faith --- and that is you and me.

We must build on the values that God teaches us and use our influence as disciples to change the world.

And that leads to a fourth point that I must make; and this one may be even harder than the other three.

GOD IS PERSONAL, BUT NEVER PRIVATE

What do I mean by that?

We have a personal relationship with God but we cannot keep that to ourselves.

Our personal relationship should influence how we act and think and do in society.

And there are no better guides to help us than those found in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

I challenge you to pick a prophet and sit down and read it carefully and prayerfully.

We have to take back our faith.

Listen to Wallis:

The religious and political Right gets the public meaning of religion mostly wrong -- preferring to focus only on sexual and cultural issues while ignoring the weightier matters of justice. The secular Left doesn't seem to get the meaning and promise of faith for politics at all -- mistakenly dismissing spirituality as irrelevant to social change. . . .

It is time to take back our faith.

Take back our faith from whom? To be honest, the confusion comes from many sources. From religious right-wingers who claim to know God's political views on every issue, and then ignore the subjects that God seems to care the most about. From pedophile priests and cover-up bishops who destroy lives and shame the church. From television preachers whose extravagant lifestyles and crass fund-raising tactics embarrass more Christians than they know. From liberal secularists who want to banish faith from public life and deny spiritual values to the soul of politics. And even from liberal theologians whose cultural conformity and creedal modernity serve to erode the foundations of historic biblical faith. From New Age philosophers who want to make Jesus into a nonthreatening spiritual guru. And from politicians who love to say how religious they are but utterly fail to apply the values of faith to their public leadership and political policies.

WOE!

What made that hit home even more for me was a visit I once paid to an independent church a few years ago.

They must have used the word PROSPERITY at least 25 times

You were promised that if you followed their interpretation of the Gospel (which is of course the only correct way) then God would bless you.

Otherwise . . . and they always kind of left that hanging.

I left that service and wanted to quit the ministry --- to quit Christianity --- if that is what it really is about.

But I refuse to give in to that perverted understanding of God and Jesus Christ.

God calls us together --- not so that we can follow the rules and be blessed, or to reflect the cultures values:

but so that we can build communities of faith whose purpose is to reshape lives and the world.

God calls us as a people of faith to not only talk about our faith --- but to actually live our faith.

In other words --- we are called to be Disciples for Jesus

To become the Disciples Jesus wants us to be, we cannot ignore the social ills of our times --- the social ills that were so near and dear to Jesus.

Poverty
Justice
Opportunity and access

I don't know about you, but it is pretty exciting to recognize that we are a part of a community that is going to change the world with God's love and justice.

I could go on all day, but that is not what you need to hear today.

But I do want to remind you of these four main points:

- GOD IS NOT PARTISAN
- VALUES MATTER
- ONLY THE PEOPLE OF FAITH CAN CHANGE THE WAY THE WIND IS BLOWING IN AMERICA TO HELP ALL PEOPLE HEAR THE PROPHETIC CALL OF THE BIBLE.
- GOD IS PERSONAL, BUT NEVER PRIVATE

A week ago I went out and joined the protest that took place at the State House over the separation of families at our borders.

I think that we can all agree that babies and children should not be taken from their parents

What we can disagree over is how best to deal with the disparity and injustice that makes a mother or father flee their country and travel thousands of miles in search of something better.

I believe that Abraham Lincoln had it right when he suggested that: Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God's blessing and endorsement for our national policies and practices --- saying, in effect, that God is on our side. Rather Lincoln said, we should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God's side.