

You Asked for It: Politics from the Pulpit
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Luke 4:14-30

On the first day at work in the first church I served as pastor, a terrible truth struck me: I had to write a sermon for delivery six days later. And that would be true every Monday morning for the rest of my....career! Twenty-six years later I'm still at it, and though you develop a rhythm for these things, the weekly sermon preparation and proclamation is never far from mind. Except for these summer requests, my sermons are drawn from the lectionary, a three-year cycle of Sunday readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, Gospels, Epistles, and Psalms. I believe this discipline allows for the whole Bible to speak to our lives, rather than letting the preacher search for biblical texts that support the point she's trying to make.

For my first sermon, I thought I would follow in the footsteps of Jesus and use the text he did for his inaugural address. We've got it all right there in the gospel according to Luke, immediately following Jesus' baptism, and his time of wilderness testing. In your mind's eye, picture the young Jewish man, a local boy—Joseph the carpenter's son-- whom everybody knew; his fresh face and bright eyes such a contrast to the lined faces and world-weary eyes of the religious leaders and teachers. See him walking to the front of the synagogue and choosing the Torah portion to read; hear his resonant voice ring out with the words of the prophet. You can easily imagine the approving nods. Then Jesus takes the "seat of teaching"—the place designated for the interpretation of the reading. The congregation listens forward, expectantly.... Listen for God's word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the fourth chapter at the 14th verse (page 61 in the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to follow along). [READ Luke 4:14- 22]

Yes, that young teacher has success written all over him! Except...one of the most important principles of biblical interpretation is to read a text in its context. Often that means reading the verses immediately before and following it. Jesus' sermon did not end at the point we've stopped reading. If only Jesus would have quit while he was ahead! But no, the text continues, [READ Luke 4:23-30]

I learned the very first week on the job that preaching holds inherent risks! And never more so than when God's Word is applied to the social and political realms of human life. As long as Jesus stuck to the reading and proclaimed its immediate fulfillment, he was applauded and praised. But as soon as he "got political" (in this case, lifting up citizens of pagan nations as role models of faith), they were ready to kill him.

Religion and politics—the two topics famously forbidden at dinner parties and family gatherings. Yet the two are firmly joined at the hip, even in our democratic society in which church and state are, by constitutional authority, kept separate. The separation of Church and State is essential as an organizational principle, but that separation is not meant to divide Christian citizens from politics. On the contrary, Reformed theology calls the Church to bring the biblical vision of justice and peace to bear on political and social realities. There is no separating the various spheres of human life—as if we can preserve a circle over here for our family life, and one over here for job and career, and one here for our spiritual life. God rules over every part of life—the world, and all the people who live in it! Our Presbyterian Constitution includes in its list of the "Great Ends" of the Church "...the promotion of social righteousness," including ministries to the poor, the sick, the lonely and the powerless; engagement in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice; sharing with Christ in the establishment of his just, peaceable and loving rule in the world." [Form of Government G-3.0300c.(3)] Did you note how the spiritual and material worlds are merged in that calling? Politics from the pulpit???

We can't avoid it, without falling short of God's good intentions for the whole creation. It is part of our sacred calling and holy purpose.

But here's where it gets dangerous, and why I suspect this subject was the single most requested one this summer. While the political dimensions of preaching have always been a matter of debate, seldom has the dialog occurred in a more polarized atmosphere than today. The bitter partisanship of the last national election produced the red state/blue state divide, and created a battleground for claims and counter-claims based on religious values. The Fairmount members who requested various versions of this topic were especially troubled by the divisive tone of the debate, and what they view as the imposition of one particular expression of Christianity upon the government of a pluralistic nation or state. One person mentioned that her reluctance to mix religion and politics had been overcome after she received an unsolicited glossy magazine in the mail emblazoned with the provocative title, "America, Return to God." The essays in the magazine used a literal interpretation of Scripture to promote a conservative Christian social agenda, and characterized the opposition as godless and immoral. This member describes herself as "Republican," and she was offended by the implication that one party's politics were exclusively Christian, and the other's were not.

I think this is an important point to make. Politics from the pulpit means that we acknowledge the crucial role of faith in guiding our values and beliefs. Politics from the pulpit means considering how those religious values shape our perspective on government policies and practices, and yes, how they influence the way we vote. But politics from the pulpit should never be wielded as a club to impugn the integrity or faithfulness of others with whom we disagree. The word "Christian" belongs to neither political party. We see far too much evidence of Jonathan Swift's observation that "we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another." Seems to me a little less self-righteous

arrogance, and a lot more humility on all sides would be beneficial. A bumpersticker I saw recently says it well: *I'm for the separation of Church and Hate*. Friends, if our religion incites us to hate, then it contradicts the one whose most fundamental commandments are to love God and to love one another.

The Reformed theological tradition in which the Presbyterian Church is steeped offers two foundational principles. One is the freedom of the pulpit; a congregation cannot restrict its preachers in how they interpret God's Word. Obviously, there's an extreme in which the preacher abuses that privilege and turns the pulpit into a platform for his or her personal viewpoint. But it's worth that risk, I believe, in order to let the Word of God be heard even—especially!-- when it challenges our assumptions and lifestyles.

The second principle is that God alone is Lord of the conscience. Even the strongest statements from the pulpit from the preacher who is faithfully seeking to declare God's Word, may be rejected by the thoughtful member. There is no social or political litmus test in a Presbyterian Church. Sometimes the charge has been leveled against us that we don't have firm convictions, that because we don't dictate to people what to believe or what to do, we reflect a kind of religious "fuzziness" or moral ambiguity. But Presbyterians value a thinking faith, one which questions and probes and holds complex realities in dynamic tension. Neither the General Assembly, the presbytery, nor your ministers are the final authority for faith and practice. God is, as you grapple with what God is calling you to do and to become. Your church stands ready to assist you, but God alone is to be Lord of your conscience. That means you can disagree with the preacher and share your differing perspective as part of an ongoing process to discern God's will.

Fairmount is amazingly and wonderfully diverse on social and political issues, which means on the one hand that no matter what stance the preacher takes, someone in the congregation

is bound to be offended. On the other hand, perhaps we have this gift to contribute to the debate: a mutual search for the common good does not depend upon unanimity of viewpoint. The late, great prophet and preacher William Sloan Coffin, in his "Message to U.S. Churches" argues for the mixing of religion and politics but makes a distinction between their purpose: *It is one thing to say with the prophet, "Let justice roll down like mighty waters," and quite another to work out the irrigation system. The former is a religious concern, the latter a political task. [Coffin, A Passion for the Possible, Westminster/ John Knox Press, rev. ed. 2003, p. 35]* We may disagree on methods and particular initiatives to address the problem of poverty, for example, while affirming *on the basis of our faith* the absolute necessity to do so. Then the discussion and debate around particular actions may be passionate but respectful. Openness that listens to and learns from a wide range of perspectives can yield greater understanding and new possibilities for problem-solving. We may not resolve our differences, but embrace each other as sisters and brothers, seeking together God's will and God's way.

Finally, friends, there is no division between the social and spiritual realms: God rules over all. Often God's Word addressing human realities seems harsh, judgmental, uncompromising. But to muffle that Word for the sake of peace and quiet, from fear of upsetting church members or creating conflict, is wrong, and unworthy of our calling to represent God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. No stranger to either politics or pulpit, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke an unsettling truth, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

So, by God's grace and with God's help, we will not be silent about things that matter. Your Session has recently approved a policy statement, giving guidance on how we can pursue social justice goals in the public arena, and do so respectfully and faithfully. Copies of the policy statement are available on information tables at chapel and sanctuary entrances. A copy

will be mailed with the August Flyer as well. We owe a debt of gratitude to Elders Dick Obermanns and Tom Allen for their thoughtful work on this statement.

And we pray first, last, and always to be led in preaching and in practice by the Holy Spirit of God. Fact is, no government, no political party, no human system has exclusive claim to God's vision and will. All human kingdoms are contingent; only God's is eternal. May God give us grace and courage to live in this world, reflecting the love and justice and peace of that other one.

NOW TO THE RULER OF ALL WORLDS, UNDYING, INVISIBLE, THE ONLY GOD, BE HONOR AND GLORY FOREVER AND EVER!
AMEN.

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