

**Political Faith or Faithful Politics?  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
19 October 2008  
Text: Matthew 22:15-22**

At dinner one night, a young boy related to his parents how at school that day they'd learned about word prefixes. "We learned that "pro" is the opposite of "con," he began, "so does that mean that the opposite of "progress" is "congress"??!! Well. Despite sometimes being an easy target for humor based on the discrepancy between its ideals and practice, civil government has always been upheld by the Presbyterian Church as an expression of God's divine rule. This is significant as we consider the relationship between politics and faith because it suggests that the church engage, rather than withdraw from political processes and issues.

We certainly have a tradition of exactly that! Francis Makemie, considered the father of the American Presbyterian Church, led a worship service in New York in 1707 and was arrested by the governor for preaching without a license. He was imprisoned for two months before waging a successful defense that is now regarded as a landmark case in favor of religious freedom in America. At the time of his arrest, the governor described Makemie as "a preacher, a doctor...a merchant, an attorney, and . . . worst of all a disturber of governments." [*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*] It's been said that so many others followed Makemie's lead that King George described the American Revolution as "that Presbyterian War."

From its earliest expressions, Reformed theology has defined a role for the church's involvement in the secular political order. John Calvin challenged the notion that Christian liberty rendered civil authority powerless, and the Westminster Confession from the 17<sup>th</sup> century cites the apostle Paul's admonition to "obey the governing authorities" as evidence of the Church's responsibility to uphold and preserve political

structures. Whether as defender or disturber of governments, Presbyterians have always understood involvement in the social and political concerns of the day to be part of its mission.

How that involvement is expressed depends in part upon the social location of the Church in a particular historical moment. In the morning scripture text, the religious people are part of conquered population, ruled by a government that levies harsh taxes and imposes oppressive control upon them. It's important that we hear this exchange between Jesus and some religious leaders in that context first, to consider its meaning for our own, of living in a democracy in which our leaders are freely chosen. Listen for God's word in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter, at the 15<sup>th</sup> verse.

[MATTHEW 22:15-22]

On this very Sunday a group of pastors across the country are openly violating the law that bans churches from direct involvement in political campaigns because of their tax-exempt status. These pastors have signed on to an effort called "The Pulpit Initiative" organized by the conservative legal group Alliance Defense Fund. According to National Public Radio, the preachers will use their pulpits to endorse or oppose a political candidate by name. One of the pastors involved explained that it is his job to evaluate candidates in light of biblical teachings. He said, "Bottom line is, I'm a spiritual leader in this community...we need to lead spiritually, and we need to be able to speak about the moral issues of the day. And right now, the moral issues are also the political ones." Another of the pastors observed, "We tell our congregation how to behave in the bedroom; why not the voting booth as well?"

*[summarized from an NPR story, October 14, 2008]*

I make reference to "The Pulpit Initiative" in order to draw a distinction between its underlying perspective and that of the Presbyterian Church. While we believe in the freedom of the pulpit to reflect the Word of God and its implications for the faith and life of believers, we do not attribute infallibility to the human being proclaiming that Word. Because we affirm that

“God alone is Lord of the conscience,” the congregation is free to disagree with the particular perspective of the preacher, and in fact as you’ve heard me say many times, the best sermons are those that represent the lively conversation among us. In Reformed theology, we struggle together with what God is calling us to do with respect to social, political, and moral issues, and at the end of the day, we might in good faith arrive at very different conclusions. Though I have strong *personal* political convictions, I also respect you for yours that might differ from mine, and I relish being part of a community where our spiritual mission unites us across any political differences. The Diversity Council entitled the congregational conversations about diversity, “Can we talk about it?” because we trust the answer to that question is always “yes.” I have never, nor will ever, use the authority of this pulpit to tell you who to vote for. I will, however, say that God calls us to participate thoughtfully and faithfully in the political process. There is an enormous difference between politicizing faith on the one hand, and bringing faith to bear on political decisions.

The Pharisees in our text tried to do the first. They weren’t really interested in engaging Jesus in a discussion about righteous stewardship of their personal wealth, or the faithful person’s civic responsibility to the State. Instead they wanted to trip him up; to trap him with an unwinnable choice. If he had said, “yes, pay”---the people for whom paying these taxes had left them little more than impoverished slaves would drop him like a hot potato. But if he had said, “no, don’t pay,” he could have been arrested on the spot for treason. Either way, the religious leaders would have successfully eliminated Jesus and the threat posed by the Kingdom of God to their carefully constructed religious world. Perceiving this threat, they asked him to lay down a law that would have further exacerbated the political climate, no matter what.

Instead Jesus tells a joke. He creates an ironic situation that sends the religious leaders sputtering and slinking away, and that makes a profound theological point.

*Show me the money. Give me the coin used for the tax.* They readily produce the visual aid, and immediately set themselves up. Roman coinage bore the emperor's graven image with an inscription proclaiming him to be "Divine Son and Lord." For the faithful even to come in contact with such an object that clearly broke two commandments was unthinkable. What were these religious leaders doing with such a coin? With Jesus' simple request, he's already revealed their hypocrisy. But he goes on. *Whose head is this, and whose title?* Their answer says right out loud who they really serve. The emperor! Theologian Doug Adams imagines Jesus laughing as he motioned toward his interrogators, *so give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's...and to God the things that are God's.. .and then pocketing the coin!* By missing the humor in this exchange, we miss Jesus' point. He's reminding the religious leaders that the world cannot be divvied up into separate compartments: one for the state, one for the church; one ruled by earthly powers, one by divine. God rules over it all. We can't possibly designate a portion of our wealth for God; everything we have is God's already!

Jesus didn't really resolve the question of paying taxes. Instead he suggested that we learn the difference between the claims of government and the claims of God. To learn to give God the things that belong to God. Which includes, as the Psalmist put it, "the earth and everything in it; the world and the people who live in it." Everything! Everyone! All belong to God! And the Church's calling and joy is to learn how to reflect that divine ownership in our daily giving; in our stewardship of life and labor; in our voting and in our civic participation.

Faithful politics means that we acknowledge the crucial role of biblical teaching to guide our values and beliefs. Faithful politics means considering how those religious values shape our perspective on government policies and practices, and yes, how they influence the way we vote. But faithful politics 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. And in the last decade or so, we’ve seen far too much bitter partisanship fostered by the imposition of a narrow expression of Christianity on our pluralistic nation. We’ve seen those same adherents try to evaluate candidates solely on the basis of their responses to litmus tests based on a handful of hot-button topics such as abortion and gay marriage. The polarizing political atmosphere gives 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. And maybe this is the gift that the Presbyterian Church in general and Fairmount in particular have to contribute to the discussion: a mutual search for the common good does not depend upon unanimity of viewpoint. We can talk about it, no matter how differently we see it, or believe we should promote it. 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 of doing 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.

The worst thing would be to say nothing or to do nothing in the political realm. In that case, we belie the very gospel we proclaim by implying there are some areas over which God does not rule. Friends, there is no division between the

political and spiritual realms: God rules over all. We operate out of a theology of abundance as surely in the political realm as in the financial one. God desires the health and wholeness of the world and is quite capable of working divine good through human governments and authorities. In our nation, blessed with abundant resources and a rich history of democracy and freedom, we are called to apply faith to politics and partner with God in the sacred task of doing justice and reflecting the values of God's Kingdom here on earth.

In a little over two weeks from now, we will elect leaders to govern this nation. I will be praying, as I hope you will be praying, to be led by the Holy Spirit of God. Fact is, no government, no political party, no human system can lay exclusive claim to God's vision and will. All human kingdoms are contingent; only God's is eternal. May God grant us wisdom and courage to live in this world, reflecting the love and justice and peace of that other one. AMEN.

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