

Sermon – “Political Sermon”  
Sunday, October 21, 2018  
Scripture Readings: Job 38:1-7, Mark 10:35-45  
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A reading from the book of Job, near the very end, in which God finally responds to Job and all his friends speaking at such length about what they are so sure is true. Listen for God’s word in Job 38:1-7 and 34-41.

*<sup>1</sup>Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: <sup>2</sup>“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? <sup>3</sup>Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.*

*<sup>4</sup>“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. <sup>5</sup>Who determined its measurements — surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? <sup>6</sup>On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone <sup>7</sup>when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

*<sup>34</sup>“Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? <sup>35</sup>Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go and say to you, ‘Here we are?’ <sup>36</sup>Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind? <sup>37</sup>Who has the wisdom to number the clouds? Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens, <sup>38</sup>when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together?*

*<sup>39</sup>“Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions, <sup>40</sup>when they crouch in their dens, or lie in wait in their covert? <sup>41</sup>Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?”*

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A second reading, from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verses 35 through 45:

*<sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” <sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” <sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”*

*<sup>39</sup>They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; <sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”*

*<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup>But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

You will of course have noticed the title of my words to you today: “Political Sermon”. Maybe that has made you a little bit nervous. There might be no easier way for a preacher to get himself or herself fired by a congregation than to venture into that particular minefield.

We, by which I mean most of contemporary society, do have a real discomfort with the idea of mixing politics and religion. There are plenty of reasons for that, some based on the wisdom and experiences of history and some based on more selfish concerns, like not really wanting to hear about it if Jesus wants something different than what we want to do. Sometimes it troubles us because politics are things over which people differ, and openly unearthing our disagreements can be counter to the goal of harmony and unity.

Of course, on the other hand, things about which people differ tend to be things that *matter*, and I am not sure the goal of the Christian church is to concern itself only with the things that do not matter. Irrelevance is one of the two chief labels with which contemporary society dismisses the church, and I would question the idea that we are *meant* to be irrelevant. (The other most common, dismissive accusation is that the church is hypocritical, but we shall touch on that one another time.)

Maybe the most earnest reason for frustration at politics entering these doors comes from the recognition that human beings are spiritual creatures, who need spiritual nourishment. The space and time of periodic, regular retreat are true needs for human beings, retreat in which what we are attending to is simply the feeding of the soul and the worship of God, not the practicalities and the worldly conflicts we occupy everywhere else.

And yet, there is something disturbing about the idea that of all the things providing input into our decisions about politics—which do after all have real, even life-or-death consequences for us and others—the one place we are not ever allowed to turn for help in navigating this is to God, at least not together. We can hear and engage with the arguments of those who share nothing with us, but we must never venture into exploring the thoughts of those with whom we share our deepest convictions of all. As Christians, it seems, we must struggle alone. Surely not!

But we run into this thing, this phrase we’ve adopted as true beyond all doubt, the goal of “separation of church and state.” Now, humanity arrived at the development of that idea by hard experience, and I would not toss it aside. But neither it nor anything else should be considered a truth that is beyond all reach of rational examination.

And if we think about it carefully, we surely must conclude that “separation of church and state” is not a concept which can be used in a blanket way to smother all consideration of how Christians should think about the affairs of state. It is meant primarily to prevent two things, both of which have been historically dangerous.

One is giving the state control over the church. Things have gone very badly when that has happened, and it should offend our goal of fidelity to Christ to allow whoever comes into worldly power to have charge of what we teach and to control our relationships with our creator. The other danger is that any religions should be given privileged seats at the table of government. Here, too, things have gone very badly, not only for those unlucky enough to have homes in a denomination other than the one given special privilege, but also for anyone in the winning religion who cares what happens to the church when it succumbs to the temptations of maintaining secular power.

What separation of church and state does *not* have to mean, and *must* not, I contend, is the idea that persons are not allowed to let the very deepest truths they know play a role in their public lives.

The business of government, the work of politics, is deciding how things will be. To decide how things will be, we must work from some conception of how things *should* be. The question of how things should be is a moral question; it is a question of how one defines “the good”. And a moral question is a question whose answers flow from one’s deepest understanding of what the world is about and for. This is another way of saying it is a *religious* question—for literally everyone, not just those whose religious outlooks involve a god. Our belief systems are where our convictions come from about what ought to be so. How things should be is thus a fundamentally religious question.

And if the question of how things *should be* is not permitted to influence anything, there is no hope for justice in the world. So while the lessons of history teach us to wholeheartedly embrace institutional separation of church and state, we cannot conclude our faith has no legitimate voice in helping us decide the right thing to do.

One weird consequence of trying to assert that we can’t talk about politics inside the church is that it lets the secular world yank away any issue of concern from eligibility for discussion within the church at any time. The actors of state are allowed to annex for themselves any area of concern about the human condition, and that we suddenly can’t think or talk about it anymore as Christians.

One can almost imagine a tired preacher one Sunday every March lamenting aloud the bane of Daylight Saving Time, which makes us all get up an hour earlier for church, and one year getting a laugh of recognition from the congregation...and the next year getting an angry letter from a member who wants to resign, just because *that* year the state legislature is considering a bill to do away with the time change, making this suddenly a matter of politics, and “politics shouldn’t be coming from the pulpit.”

Sometimes it is more serious. The church, recalling Jesus, Mary, and Joseph fleeing to Egypt to escape the violence of King Herod, for two thousand years has never stopped praying for the plight of refugees fleeing violence. For centuries before that, the Jewish people, remembering their own enslavement and flight from Egypt, were under orders to treat with compassion the foreigner who had come among them.

But suddenly, one day in A.D. 2016, when the political fashions of the day turn against refugees, preachers who continue to ask God’s mercy on those escaping war and persecution are seen as committing the sin of bringing politics into religion. Is it truly right that the church should drop its interest in any question of how human beings are treated by one another the moment a politician says a word about that topic?

I say no. It should not be a controversial matter within any church that claims to follow after Jesus of Nazareth to voice concern for the fearful, the orphan, the widow, the poor, the lost, or anyone else who suffers. Does God care about what happens to people in the world? If so, then the followers of God should not be silent about what happens to those people.

And considering the people of the world brings us to the word we are focusing on today: mission. What is mission? Mission is a particularly Christian form of service, deriving from the commission Jesus gave to go and spread the Gospel to the whole world.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes churches have taken this completely in one of two directions. Either they have single-mindedly pursued what is often known as the “Social Gospel,” only recognizing the goal of *material* improvement of the world, or else they have narrowly sought after the salvation of souls through introduction to a belief system and the name of Jesus Christ. Neither of these constricted versions of “mission” matches very well the story and teaching of Jesus.

Patterning our own mission after the way Jesus himself did this work means that for us, his followers, mission is neither strictly word nor deed. Jesus preached the Good News of salvation by openly speaking of it and by demonstrating the nature of the Kingdom of God in his compassionate life of servanthood. He taught, and healed, and served.

"Mission" means providing that the Word of God should reach the whole world, and that those we reach should both hear and experience the Gospel at our hands. We don't love our neighbors or hold the hope of Christ as a real belief if we refuse to share it. We also don't love our neighbors or obey Christ by letting those neighbors rot in unfortunate conditions while promising them “pie in the sky, by and by.”

So what is *our* mission? We're stuck in a tight spot, here in contemporary mainline Protestantism. We're culturally afraid of evangelism. Our branch of the church tends to be uncomfortable with that. And doing anything to systematically change the material conditions which human beings endure is...politics; for politics are the working out of the way our society shall function and be ordered. If the church is fearful of *both* halves of mission, afraid to speak about the world to come *and* afraid to speak about how to change this one, then we're going to be an impotent failure at mission in every respect.

I say we need more of both. Evangelism? I'll say this: Fear of mentioning Jesus's name outside this building is not only failure to share the hope we've been given, it actively allows Jesus's name to be undermined, considering all the groups of people out there who are completely unafraid to utter his name as a reason for what they're doing, many of whom are doing really horrid things in that name. Will we let that be what Jesus means to the world?

But this is called “Political Sermon”, so the evangelistic half we'll mostly have to consider another time.

I want us today to think about this: We have an election coming very soon. What is our responsibility as those who wield the power of the vote? What is the duty of a follower of Christ who has been given the authority and power that a citizen has in a democracy? We need to take that seriously. A lot of well-intentioned people will get up in front of you, urging you to participate, and utter words like, “It doesn't matter which way you vote; just vote.” Well, I won't say that. It matters a whole lot which way you vote. People's well-being depends on it. I will go so far as to say you *shouldn't* vote where you know nothing of the matter at hand, because it is actively harmful to throw your weight behind goals of which you are ignorant.

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<sup>1</sup> The instructions Jesus gave his disciples at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 28, verses 18-20) are traditionally referred to as the “Great Commission,” recorded in this way: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

But that is no argument for staying home on Election Day. We are disciples, which means we are servants, and in our particular hands are the resources of our particular lives. We have our hands themselves, our words, our energy and talents, and our money to serve with. And here, in a democratic place, we also have in our hands a piece of influence on how things will be run. It is no more a faithful exercise of discipleship to waste that power than it is to waste our money or any other tool we have been given. Which means we must put in some effort. It means examining and praying about what best serves the world before walking in to cast that vote. God cares about what happens to the people whose lives will be affected by whether and how you vote.

One final thing I'll take up here, though. There is one more reason people are uncomfortable mixing politics and religion, one that cannot be forgotten. Let us revisit God's words to Job.

“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ...I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements — surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”<sup>2</sup>

And Jesus's words to James and John: “You do not know what you are asking.”<sup>3</sup>

There are few things more dangerous when letting faith guide your politics than to forget words like these. We know, frankly, nothing. We all have power in the world, whether a little or a lot, and we must never exercise our power out of the conceit that we have true wisdom, as if the words that come from our minds and our mouths, which before that come mainly from our own desires, are God's own sacred words.

I could be wrong about everything I have said here today. (If I am, you will be sure to tell me!) If not these things, then surely I am wrong about some things, crucial things. I wasn't there when the foundations of the earth were built, and across the wholeness of things, the vastness of the universe and all that is in it, I know nothing.

You, too, are wrong, about terribly important things, and we don't even know which things. Let us not ever forget that if the exercise of power is not coupled with a constant, intentional humility, dreadful things will never fail to result. We have all lived through the sight of non-humble power. It is the sight of wars, manmade famines, and oppression.

So let us carry out our mission. Let us carry it out in obedient service, motivated by our confident hope in Christ, yet thoroughly infused with just enough fear in the awareness of our own ignorance that even in our boldest convictions, even while pushing hard to make things right, we are always prepared to respect the possibility and hear the evidence that we have it wrong and need to repent and change course.

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from Job 38:1-6 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>3</sup> From Mark 10:38 (*NRSV*).

Maybe there, in that humility, we can even overcome our fear of disunity. Because maybe there, in humility, we can disagree and remain in the same room. Disagree, and remain brothers and sisters who love one another. Disagree, making the case for something with great passion, and yet do what the outside world does not do, which is to hear what is on another's heart, too, and consider it with open ears. A fake unity that survives on hiding its differences is not a very robust unity anyway. A unity tested by struggle alongside one another within a committed bond of shared faith, dedicated study of scripture, and prayer for and with one another, in which we are unafraid to speak to and even more unafraid to learn from one another- *that* is unity forged strong, and that is a unity in which the church may serve the world far more truly than it ever will as a timid creature.

May God give us the grace and endurance, and the wisdom. Amen.