

God is not a Whig

It is unusual for the lectionary to give us two lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures in addition to the psalm, but today it does.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Isaiah 58:9b-14

I can't tell you how many times I have heard people mutter that the United Church of Christ, (and I think they might mean me) is too liberal, or too engaged in politics. I have also heard more times than I care to count that the church is not active enough in defense of those people God loves and too reticent to challenge "the status quo". And, then I also hear that people come to church to be enlightened, to find spiritual strength not to be reminded of the latest headlines. We don't want the muck of politics polluting our religious sanctuary. And we are incensed when politicians ask churches to provide them with mailing lists.

I can sympathize, I understand the desire to leave the world out there, but it won't wash. Much as we would like to be "heavenly minded", much as we need to be "heavenly minded", we are called, by our covenant with God, by such Biblical witness as we read this morning, to stick our nose in the dirty business of human power, we are "appointed over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant".

The notion that government should not interfere in my religion nor support one religion over another, is not the same as saying that my religious values should not influence my public life. As a Mathematician I know would say, "it is not symmetric".

For Biblical standards are the very standards we should use. It is inherent to the notion of belief, not that we can pick up and put down ideas, but rather that all our hearts are convinced of the biblical view of the created order. This conviction prevents us from addressing the world through any lens other than our relationship to God and to one another. Public discourse for everyone is enhanced as WE engage civic leaders on the values and ethics affirmed by our faith. At the same time, religious liberty and the integrity of our democracy is threatened when candidates claim that God has taken sides in the human power contest: whether in that narrow strip of Biblical land, or the islands of Indonesia, or right here in American where many claim that God would vote for..... I know you were waiting to see what I would say. But God is not a Democrat, even if I am. God is not a Republican even if you are. God is not a Whig or a Tory, a Member of the Partie Quebequois, or the Taliban. Claims of divine appointment for any political leader inevitably lead us to uncritical affirmation of policies, and are at best bad theology (leaning toward idolatry) and at worst dangerous religion (leading toward death.)

Devout Christians and other people of faith can choose to be politically active on either side of our particular divide, even if it is only to vote, - *for reasons deeply*

rooted in their faith. The coming election does have religious dimensions – though perhaps not the obvious ones. It is a Christian's job to evaluate all leaders by measuring their actions and proposed actions – that is, policies, against the complete range of Christian ethics and values. Inevitably, some of these values will be in competition with one another – I mean most everyone is against hunger – But whether it is better abated by food stamps or by creating jobs in China is a question of spiritual discernment.

While there are those who have been claiming God's special blessing on their politics, so too many people have told us that religion is either irrelevant or poisonous to the political process. Both views either don't know what kind of Christians we are – or know and would like to lessen our involvement. But we are the kind of Christians who don't shy away from the messiness of human activities. Sometimes it is very hard to find the words to say who we are – and sometimes we find ourselves defining ourselves in the negative – over against those others. I would rather find the theological words to say clearly who we are because it is from that clarity that we speak to the religious issues before us. We at Hancock are Christians who have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus. We recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us;

We understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples and we invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable.

We accept the challenge of demonstrating the fullest expression of what we believe in the way we behave toward one another and toward other people. And we find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty - more value in questioning than in absolutes.

We at Hancock are a community dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers; and all the while we recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

I don't think this is new to anyone here, but sometimes we just don't have the religious words to say it in such a way that it empowers us to stand firmly and confidently in the face of those who say religion is at best irrelevant and at worst destructive.

But that said, we are not Whigs either. Nor Republicans or Democrats, or Green, or whatever in long stretch of

history people have chosen to call the groups they form to wield human power.

Some of us will be tempted to be single issue voters; or single personality voters. That's even true in the negative for the "Anybody but Bush" people, but God does not let us off so lightly.

The Democratic convention is just over and the Republican convention about to begin. And we have a little more than two months to evaluate our power brokers in the light of who we are – whose we are – before we will have a chance to speak the words God puts in our mouth - with our votes.

For we do not believe that religious issues are limited to this sanctuary – however much we would like to be able to take refuge from the 'dirty business' of politics, there are theological issues before us that beg to be addressed. There are several religious issues in the present campaign that I can name, and probably a few more that have occurred to you.

For example, it is a religious issue to respect the **image of God** in every person. And we are right to challenge any who disrespect that image. Those who sanction torture, slavery, and bigotry do not speak for us. Those who increase education and health care and decent housing do.

This also implies the intrinsic sacredness of human life and echoes God's challenge to "**choose life**". We find this theological question popping out in all sorts of political hot potatoes: capital punishment and genocide, stem cell research and abortion, WMD's and pandemics like AIDS,

Our scriptures remind of God's directive that those who are **most vulnerable** need our protection. Sometimes, we are tempted to point the finger, suggesting that affliction and disparity are just consequences of personal decision making – but we know better. And we know that poverty, disease and hunger; slavery, theft and abuse are not just individual issues of ignorance, neglect and greed, but are tied up with the complicated issues of global finance, governmental planning and political influence. And people of the Book are not allowed by our covenant with God to write people off because they are strangers.

The **stewardship** of the earth is one of the most overtly religious issues we moderns face. How much is enough? How best can we use the natural gifts we are given? How can we balance one value, say of saving fishing jobs with another of fish stock preservation? And what of the future – we cannot take that which belongs not to us but to our great grandchildren.

Telling the **truth**, about all things, little and big, is a theological issue. It's a cynical truism that no politician tells the truth – and who but we will find out who speaks more truthfully. Human beings are challenged not just by sometimes wanting to lie, for whatever reason, but more often by not being able to see the truth. One of the Spirit's gifts to the church is discernment helping us to know not only who speaks what they know to be true, but also who understands truly.

And perhaps the biggest religious issue we face is the **war**. We know Jesus blesses the peacemakers. We know that there is no "good" war and yet we all know that there are limits to our tolerance for risk, if not for us for those same great grandchildren. Because of our divinely created inter-dependence, we know that our security depends on the well being of our global neighbors.

Our response to fearful things is also a theological issue. If we falter in faith, we will begin to demonize our enemies rather than pray for them. The Bible is chock full of stories that end very badly because God's people felt they had to defend themselves. These are usually rather violent and feature a ruler who has conflated his dreams of earthly glory with the vision of the kingdom of God. But Isaiah says, "if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,... you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." This is our hope in the face of **terror**. Over the next two months, you are going to mix religion and politics. It is inevitable. So engage the task with joy. Talk religion and politics with your family. Argue theology and ethics with your neighbors. Let them know you are the kind of Christian who is not afraid to engage the world as it is and one who can do so with love. Make politics the object of your prayer and ask for discernment. Claim your right to spirit-guided wisdom. .. "And God will put the words in your mouth."

ⁱ With thanks to "Sojourners" magazine and "Progressive Christianity" website for inspiration.