

God's Politics: Protest is Good, Alternatives Are Better  
 June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2006  
 Jeff Clinger  
 Matthew 5:1-11

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

Today is the second week of our five part Sermon Series *God's Politics*. Over the course of these five weeks Steve and I are exploring Jim Wallis' book, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* and talking about the importance of reclaiming our faith as we engage our faith in the world around us. Last week Steve set up the series by laying out the importance of engaging our faith with our politics. We so often talk in our society about never mentioning religion and politics in polite company, but in spite of the difficult conversations that these topics often evoke, they are conversations that we as people of faith desperately need to have. And so this morning as we prepare to move forward in our conversations about this material, I want to share a wonderful contemporary parable. It goes something like this...

A young man finds himself frustrated by a situation he's in and so he begins to complain about it. He complains to his mother and she offers him a solution, but he seems to busy to hear it, he's investing all of his energy in complaining. As he moves on in his day he complains to one of his best friends and this friend tries to ask questions

about what could be done to make the situation better. But, the young man doesn't want to engage in any conversation about the problem, he simply wants to complain about it. And so he approaches a teacher in school complaining about how bad things are and the teacher asks him what he plans to do to change the situation. The young man looks at his teacher in this perplexed sort of way and responds, "I can't change the situation – it's just the way it is." And he walks away continuing to complain to anyone who will listen and ignoring the opportunities for change that exist.

In many ways we as a society have become like this young man. We become consumed by our complaints, blind to the potential solutions, and in fact not even all that interested in finding or working for solutions. All too often we are simply content to spend our time complaining.

This human tendency to complain – to simply be against things is at the core of the human problem today. More specifically, I believe it is at the core of the political impasse in which we have found ourselves in this country. Republicans complain about things that Democrats do, Democrats complain about things that Republicans do, and Independents Complain about things that both Democrats and Republicans do. And in the midst of the complaining that is going on people die of hunger and disease in this country and around the world every day while we sit around and complain about the things that other people are failing to do.

And so this morning, as we continue our Sermon Series on God's Politics, I want to look at this tendency and challenge us all as people of faith, to move beyond what Jim Wallis calls this Politics of Complaint – to move beyond this attitude of complaint because while protest is good, alternatives are better. It is time, as Steve said several

times last Sunday, that we take back our faith. And so this morning I want to turn to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount as an illustration of his life that embodied this creation of and working for alternatives. We'll then look at a couple of modern day examples of alternatives being offered and close with an examination of small every day things that we can do to create healthier alternatives for all of creation.

Today's scripture reading is often referred to as Jesus' sermon on the mount or the Beatitudes – they are a series of blessings talking about some pretty radical ways in which God's love and justice will be made known to people in the world. You see, much like in our society today, ancient Palestine had an upside down value system. People were considered to be as valuable as their financial assets, there was a strict religious and social hierarchy and understanding where you fit and staying in your place was an important part of leading a happy and secure life.

The social system of the day used fear to keep people in their places and insisted that the world was ordered as it was for the sake of the world and for the good of all who lived in it. The reality of the world at that time was much like today though. People were hungry, hurting, disconnected, and searching for meaning and connection and security. The systems of power in the world worked hard to project messages about how this meaning and security could be obtained and then along came this radical teacher, preaching something quite different from the popular party line of the day. Jesus came along preaching an alternative way of understanding the world, our relationship with God, and our relationships with one another.

Can you imagine what the world would have been like then and what the world would be like today if Jesus had come along and simply been like the young man I shared

in the parable earlier? Jesus could have been outraged and angry. Jesus could have complained loudly and violently against what he perceived to be unjust systems. Jesus could have made a real fuss about how bad things were. But what good would this complaint have done the world? Not a whole heck of a lot... Jesus didn't complain about the way things were, Jesus offered an alternative vision of the way the world could be a world in which the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, those who are peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake would be blessed and understand God's blessings for them. Jesus could have simply complained, but he worked to create an alternative community.

Jesus is definitely the ultimate model of this engagement of faith and politics. I realize that some of you might find the hairs on the back of your neck standing up at that statement, but there is no way to avoid it – Jesus was not just a spiritual leader, he was a leader of communities and systems – he was involved in the politics of the world, trying to bring the politics of the people in line with the politics of God. A modern day leader that is well known for doing this kind of work is Martin Luther King, Jr. *Of course he wasn't perfect, but he did incredible work to bring about God's reign in this world and he is one my greatest heroes of the faith.* I want this morning to share a story that really illustrates the greatness of how he was able to avoid the politics of complaint and offer alternatives that led to a more just world. Jim Wallis shares this story in *God's Politics* and it is one that, for me, is a powerful statement about providing alternatives.

In the mid-1960's Martin Luther King, Jr. was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work with the civil rights act of 1964. On his way home from receiving the award in

Norway he decided that he would swing by the white house for a visit with the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson. As Dr. King visited with President Johnson he shared that the next necessary step was a voting rights act so that Black Americans in the south would have the power to finally begin to change their communities in the south. During their meeting President Johnson informed Dr. King that this wasn't going to be possible for at least another 5-10 years. Johnson felt as if he had cashed in all of his political capital with southern senators on the Civil Rights Act and didn't think it would be possible. King, knowing that without the right to vote Blacks would not really be able to reap the benefits of the civil rights act, left that meeting not willing to give up.

And here's the part of the story that makes me think that Dr. King's story is so phenomenal. He had tried, he had met with the president of the United States for goodness sakes, and he had been rejected. One of his very real options at that point would have been to simply complain – to lament – to protest the remarks of the president or the southern senators that Johnson thought he would be unable to work with. Protest against these injustices would have been a very tempting option. However, this is not the route that King took. King and the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began to organize a march from Selma to Montgomery – a march that would be for the voting rights of all persons. And as a result of the attention that this march received, it was five months later – not five to ten years later – that the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed.

Jim Wallis, the author of *God's Politics* and Executive Director of Sojourners, worked with several others to put together a remarkable alternative just a few years ago. It was in the months leading up to the Iraq war, when hundreds of thousands of people

around the world were taking to the streets and protesting against the idea of going to war. These people were well intentioned of course, but they were simply protesting against the idea of going to war, they had no better alternative to be for. Wallis and his colleagues however were different.

What Wallis and his colleagues offered was called their “Six Point Plan.” It took seriously the threat of Saddam Hussein and called for his removal from power, it called for coercive disarmament of any weapons of mass destruction, it called for the creation of a democratic Iraq, it called for the organization of a massive immediate humanitarian effort for the people of Iraq, it called for the commitment to a “road map” to peace in the Middle East, and it called for the refocusing of the world’s energies on the greatest threat – a network of suicidal terrorists. While tens of thousands of persons around the world were protesting against something, Wallis and others began advocating for their alternative that excluded immediate military force.

In the weeks leading up to the war with Iraq Wallis and others met to discuss their plan with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, they had been in conversation with Blair’s cabinet leadership. Top religious leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom were pushing the plan to their government leaders. U.N. officials like Kofi Annan were studying the plan and officials from the United States state department had requested a presentation and discussion of the plan.

While we still invaded Iraq and moved on with the war, Wallis and his colleagues had created a new thing – they had created an alternative – they had created something that people could rally behind and support. They created something that people could be for rather than simply being against the war. The protest of those concerned citizen’s was

fine, but the alternative offered by Wallis and his colleagues was much better, and much more in line with the examples that Jesus lays out with his life as it's illustrated in the Sermon on the Mount and that King laid out with his work and his life.

Admittedly, both of these examples, King's work with a voting rights act and Wallis work with the Six Point Plan are huge scale undertakings, things that we as the average Jane and John Doe's in the world are unlikely to be able to undertake. But, the call to engage our faith and politics still remains. And while these following things might seem small scale, they are stepping stones to a different way of living and being in relationship with God's world that surrounds us.

Just a few things that we can all be aware of and working for to make a difference in the world: Last week Steve talked about the switch that Ridge UMC is going to be making to fair trade coffee. This is a simple thing that each of us can do in our own homes to make a difference. Check labels at the grocery store too because it's not just coffee that is made fair trade – you can find fair trade olive oil, chocolate, nuts, and more. There are those who can protest against the injustices in the manufacture of these products, but let us be people who live out alternatives.

Triple A is an organization known throughout the country for their roadside auto assistance and hotel discounts. They are also one of the leading lobby groups against public transportation. It is against their best interest as an organization to have people take public transportation and carpool and so they end up lobbying against these initiatives. We can protest this and say that it's bad, but the reality is many of us want our roadside assistance and need the perks of an auto club. That's where the Better World Club comes in. The Better World Club provides roadside assistance and

discounts, but also promotes environmentally friendly initiatives. They even have a roadside bike assistance plan.

Another detriment to the world today is the use of phosphates in laundry and dish detergent. One company providing an alternative to these pollutants is Method.

Method's goal as a company has been to evolve the household cleaner from a toxic material to an all natural biodegradable product. On their website they explain that, "At Method, we believe your home is a reflection of who you are and how you want to live. You can buy method dish and laundry detergent at Target stores.

Now, these are just a very few suggested alternatives to the common practices of the world today. I imagine that many of you know of other organizations or companies that are doing good things for God's world and for God's people.

As we all continue to learn about the world around us and to grow in relationship with God and others, our call as Christians is to continually find those ways to lives as Christ did, to let God's politics influence and shape our politics, and as we do this, let us always strive for alternatives, things that we can be for, rather than simply against.