

June 11th
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GOD'S POLITICS --- Why We Can't Talk About Religion and Politics

(Habakkuk 1:2-4 NRSV) O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? {3} Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. {4} So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous-- therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

(Habakkuk 1:2-4 The Message)

The problem as God gave Habakkuk to see it: God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen? How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!" before you come to the rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day? Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place. Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke. The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head.

Its funny to be working on my sermon right now, because I can hear upstairs Jessica and some of her friends in the midst of a political discussion. It sounds like a discussion on criminal reform and gay marriage. Obviously they haven't yet learned the lesson that you should never discuss religion or politics.

It is a lesson that we are taught early — discussions about religion and politics only leads to trouble.

I KNOW!

Nancy and I had just started dating — and I was invited to her parents home in Cary, NC. Somehow I get left along in the living room with Ed, Nancy's father — and I made the off hand comment that one of the reasons that I moved to North Carolina was to help get Jesse Helms un-elected from the US Senate. Oops!

How was I to know? — I thought everybody agreed that Jesse Helms was a bigot.

Why is it that we are so afraid to talk about religion or politics?

Its funny, but I never drew the connection between people's reticence to talk about politics and religion and my desire to not share the truth about what I do when I am on vacation.

Whenever somebody finds out what I do, their reaction is almost always one of

two extremes.

- 1) they want to talk about religion and their problems
- 2) they want to get away from me as fast as they can

Earlier this week I got my hair cut, and I needed to go to somebody new, because the woman who normally cuts my hair just had a baby.

I always struggle with the question that I know is coming — how do I answer it when they have my hair up in a lather and they are about to have sharp instruments close to my head.

The woman who cut my hair turned out to be a wonderful young woman, who grew up catholic, had attended 1st Baptist in Hammond for a short while — and basically thought that God was important, but that the institutional church had locked God out of the church and thrown away the keys.

But that took a long time to get from her, because as soon as she found out what I did, she visibly took a step back.

WHY?

Why is it so scary — so frightening — so hard, to talk about religion or politics?

Jim Wallis, in his provocative book: God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It, writes:

Perhaps these topics are too important, too potentially divisive, or raise the issues of core values and ultimate concerns that make us uncomfortable.

For the next four Sundays, Jeff and I are going to brave this dangerous territory — we are going to attempt to swim in these treacherous waters, because this is too important.

I believe that this may be the most important challenge facing us (the church) as we move into this new century.

This morning what I am going to attempt to do is set a few parameters, a few guidelines, so that as we begin to dig into some particular topics, we can do so, without getting weighed down by a lot of baggage.

Now I know that this is going to be hard.

Because as soon as some of you saw the topic this morning, you already have some assumptions in your head.

Some of you have checked out
 some of you think you know what I am going to say
 Some of you think that I have a political party agenda in mind

That leads me to the first point I want to make:

GOD IS NOT PARTISAN — In other words, God is not a republican or a democrat.

I think that is pretty straight forward.

There are parts of each of our two parties that seem to have values that could be called God affirming — and there are parts of each of our two parties that go against the very grain that God is calling us to become.

The second point I want to make is this:

VALUES MATTER

That became very clear in polling that was done following the 2004 Presidential election.

When asked to choose what influenced their vote — most people chose, one or another moral value.

And that is the first great question that we must ask → **Which values and whose values** are we going to follow?

And today in America, we are a nation that is very divided over this question — but I believe that there are core values in which we can find common ground regardless of whether we are Red or Blue.

The third point that I want to make is:

Only the people of faith can change the way the wind is blowing in America to help all people hear the prophetic call of the Bible.

You see, I am convinced that neither party gets it right.

For Republicans it's all about sex and life

Abortion

Homosexuality/Gay marriage

The Democrats are afraid of God, so they refuse to address the issue.

Both parties visions are morally and politically incomplete and need to be addressed by people of faith — and that is you and me.

We must build on the values that God teaches us — and use our influence to change the world.

And that leads to a fourth point that I must make; and this one may be even harder than the other three.

GOD IS PERSONAL, BUT NEVER PRIVATE

What do I mean by that?

We have a personal relationship with God but we cannot keep that to ourselves. Our personal relationship should influence how we act and think and do in society.

And there are no better guides to help us than those found in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.

We have to take back our faith.

Listen to Wallis:

The religious and political Right gets the public meaning of religion mostly wrong — preferring to focus only on sexual and cultural issues while ignoring the weightier matters of justice. The secular Left doesn't seem to get the meaning and promise of faith for politics at all — mistakenly dismissing spirituality as irrelevant to social change. . . .

It is time to take back our faith.

Take back our faith from whom? To be honest, the confusion comes from many sources. From religious right-wingers who claim to know God's political views on every issue, and then ignore the subjects that God seems to care the most about. From pedophile priests and cover-up bishops who destroy lives and shame the church. From television preachers whose extravagant lifestyles and crass fund-raising tactics embarrass more Christians than they know. From liberal secularists who want to banish faith from public life and deny spiritual values to the soul of politics. And even from liberal theologians whose cultural conformity and creedal modernity serve to erode the foundations of historic biblical faith. From New Age philosophers who want to make Jesus into a nonthreatening spiritual guru. And from politicians who love to say how religious they are but utterly fail to apply the values of faith to their public leadership and political policies.

WOE!

What made that hit home even more for me this week was a visit I paid to another church on Wednesday night.

They must have used the word PROSPERITY at least 25 times

You were promised that if you followed their interpretation of the Gospel (which is of course the only correct way) then God would bless you. Otherwise .

. .

I left that service and wanted to quit the ministry — to quit Christianity — if that is what it really is about.

But I refuse to give in to that perverted understanding of God and Jesus Christ.

God calls us together not so that we can follow the rules and be blessed, or reflect the culture's values, but so that we can become communities whose purpose is to reshape lives and the world.

God calls us as a people of faith to not only talk about our faith — but to actually live our faith.

To see that we cannot ignore the social ills of our times — the social ills that were so near and dear to Jesus.

Poverty
Justice
Opportunity and access

I don't know about you, but that is pretty exciting — to recognize that I am part of a community that is going to change the world with God's love and justice.

I could go on all day, but that is not what you need to hear today.

But I do want to remind you of these four main points:

- ★ GOD IS NOT PARTISAN
- ★ VALUES MATTER
- ★ ONLY THE PEOPLE OF FAITH CAN CHANGE THE WAY THE WIND IS BLOWING IN AMERICA TO HELP ALL PEOPLE HEAR THE PROPHETIC CALL OF THE BIBLE.

★ GOD IS PERSONAL, BUT NEVER PRIVATE

Pick up Jim Wallis book this week and engage in this issue → it is too important to ignore.