
Politically Incorrect: #1
“Can you talk about politics at church?”
Oct. 12, 2008 **Matt 5:13-16**

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They say that there are two things you should never bring up at a party... religion & politics. That puts me at a significant disadvantage. Those are the only two things I know anything about! (Maybe that explains why I don't get invited to many parties.) Well... this morning I want to explore both of these issues a bit. You can see from the title of this morning's sermon that today I want to ask the question... *“Can you talk about politics at church?”* I have never gotten as much feedback (positive or negative) about a sermon BEFORE it has been preached as I have this one! Overwhelmingly, the response to my question has been “NO!” or “Be careful!” or “Feel free to use me as a reference for your next job.” Maybe I'm asking for trouble... but rest assured that my intentions are certainly not to stir up controversy! I want us as a faith community to openly & honestly explore this issue together in the weeks leading up to the election... because of where we are in our nation... it is a huge issue right now for us as a country AND as a people of God.

I wonder... why are we so afraid to talk about politics at church? Is it because we are afraid of offending folks? Is it because we don't want to blur the line between church & state? Is it because we don't like the church meddling in our business? Is it because we think faith has nothing to do with politics? Let me say at the outset... I am keenly aware that when religious leaders start meddling in the affairs of state (and especially its leaders) things can go rather badly! I think here particularly of John the Baptist... remember him? When he dared to point out the personal moral failings of his nation's leader... he was arrested and beheaded! Another “prophet”... when his popularity began to threaten the power structures of the existing government... Jesus was arrested and crucified. So, I'm aware that I am entering into a somewhat “no-win” situation.... But it's such a significant issue... and we are at a point in our nation where it is so much before us... I just don't think we can ignore it, do you?

Let's examine some of those reasons real quickly...

First, do we really believe that our faith has nothing to do with our politics? *Surely not!* Have we so compartmentalized our lives that we can separate what God says over here from what our politics says over there and be content with that? We're okay obeying God when it comes to how we should worship, how we should conduct our marriages, how we should raise our children, and serve him... but we're NOT willing to take his advice on how we should vote or be involved in the political process? Are we so “secularized” today that we can just slip off our “Christianity” as we enter in to the voter's booth and put it back on when we come out? I don't think any one of us believe that! For most of us... our faith plays an extremely important role in everything that we do... and so that shouldn't be the reason we are reluctant to bring up the subject at church... Politics has everything to do with our FAITH... because FAITH has a part in everything that we do!

Or are we afraid of blurring the line between church & state? I mean, I respect that line. I think its been a good thing. But, it is interesting as you go back and actually look at the history and at the intent of the founding fathers... WHY that line is there to begin with. It was there to keep the government from meddling in the business of God. It was never intended to keep Christians from influencing the business of government! I mean, it's OUR government too, isn't it? I think there have been those outside the church

who have twisted this 'separation of church & state' to mean something it was never intended to mean. This line between church & state is there to protect the church from the government coming in and telling us how to do things... not to keep us out of politics!

Maybe it's because we just don't want to "offend" people? I really suspect this is the main reason we're afraid of bringing up anything 'political' at church. And its one I certainly understand... I don't want to offend anyone either! And I realize that we all come from varied backgrounds and have different (and sometimes quite passionate) political views... but is THIS a reason to ignore it? Still, I don't see where Jesus shied away from dealing with issues just because they may have gotten "sticky". Did he ever back away from saying something just because it might offend somebody? Ask the Pharisees if Jesus was ever "politically incorrect". We just finished a month-long study on N.T. baptism... and I suspect there were some who disagree with me that baptism is important and even necessary for salvation. Does that mean that I shouldn't have brought it up? What other parts of the Bible should be "off limits" simply because they might offend?

Now, I will make a commitment to you... I am going to do my best in the coming weeks as we explore this relationship between Faith & Politics... to not be "political" or "partisan" in any way. I simply want to be "Biblical." I believe in speaking where the Bible speaks and being silent where it is silent... so please, help me. I don't want to lose my head! This is my pledge to you!

But its precisely because I believe the Bible DOES speak to this issue of Faith & Politics that I don't believe that we can ignore it! If you don't think that 'faith' has played a part in this year's election, you must've had your head under a rock! It has been a remarkable campaign! We've seen an ordained Baptist preacher become a major contender for the Republican nomination. There was the controversy over Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright... and he eventually had to disown his own preacher to stay politically viable! There was a Mormon candidate for the first time in history! There was the amusing way in which Joe Biden & Nancy Pelosi tried to explain the Catholic church's position on abortion... only to be blasted by Catholic church for horribly misrepresenting the church's teaching. And to the recent criticism of Sarah Palin and her Pentecostal roots. Religion has played a huge role in this year's election... good or bad... or indifferent! And we live in interesting times!

The last few years has seen our country really wrestling with some pretty significant, deep moral & religious issues: like the "justness" of war, the question of how we fend off terrorism without becoming terrorists ourselves?, What does God expect of us as stewards of the environment? The homosexual marriage debate (back in the news this week in Ct), the legality of abortion. The old issues of racism and equal rights are still with us. And the recent problems with the economy have risen to the fore more questions about greed & poverty among us. Aren't these not moral and religious issues that Christians (as followers of Jesus) ought to care about? Ought to have something to say? Folks, I've got to tell you... the church cannot afford to just stand by and say nothing... we need to talk about it and we need to talk about it NOW!

WHAT ROLE SHOULD FAITH PLAY IN POLITICS?

This is the issue that I believe Jesus addressed there in the Sermon on the Mt. Matthew 5:13-16

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A Few Observations...

#1 Jesus is talking to his disciples... not a government

Pres. Reagan famously latched on to this image of a *shining city on a hill* to describe America... precisely because it IS so inspiring! That resonated with the American people at a time when we were down. We had been thru Watergate, Vietnam, double-digit inflation, the hostage crisis... and it gave the country a hopeful image to latch on to! But it was horribly out of context... and NOT what Jesus meant at all! Now, America IS a great nation... but notice the context... the city set on a hill here isn't America... and its not Rome, either... it's the Kingdom of God! Look back a few verses. Jesus is talking to his disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven. Christians... the Church is the shining city on a hill! WE are the ones who are supposed to offer light and hope! Maybe we've forgotten OUR job and maybe we're expecting the government to do that for us??? But Jesus told US to do it!

#2 Jesus deliberately uses “political” terminology

Don't think Jesus ever “got political”? Think again! His very use of the term “kingdom of Heaven” (cf. vs. 3, 10) was an affront to the kingdoms of the world! To the people of his day the term for nation or government was ‘kingdom’. For Jesus to speak of the “Kingdom of Heaven” was to set up a deliberate contrast between the government of the world (Rome) and the government/ kingdom of God. So, make no mistake here... Jesus isn't just giving us a nice little sermon for church... he is being deliberately “political” and he is saying that there is another way... a better way! Maybe we don't need to get too down in the mouth about the way the kingdom of the world is... because there's a better kingdom out there?

#3 The point is: Jesus is telling those of us in the Kingdom of Heaven to go out and be salt & light in the Kingdom of the World! Jesus is telling us to actively engage the world in which we live as salt & as light! We might prefer to withdraw into nice little Christian communes and shut out the world... we can take care of our own, raise our kids free from outside influence... and just be the Kingdom of God. But Jesus calls us to be more... he calls us to be active agents of God in the kingdom of the world as well! To the extent that we can, we flavor & influence the world around us for good... we shine our lights NOT so that the world will see us... but so that they will see God and praise Him in heaven! One definition of *politics* I saw recently: “*the way we interact with the world.*” Being salt and light is interacting with the world... politics. To be a Christian is to be “political” in that sense.

So, can we talk about politics here? I hope the answer is YES! In fact, we had BETTER talk about it here... as we interact with the world as salt & light our goal is to make the world a better place... a more Godly place. **“Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven”** Now, THAT'S a HOPE I can believe in!

Well, you may be asking how, preacher? Well... participating in the democratic process on Nov. 4th and going to vote... supporting for the candidates who best shares your values? That's ONE way. Another might be volunteering at a soup kitchen that feeds the hungry... or taking clothes down to the outreach center to clothe the poor... or taking in a child whose mother opted not to abort, or modifying your lifestyle to use less energy and be a better steward of the environment. There are LOTS of ways to be “salt” and “light”.

What do YOU need to do? Has your faith affected your politics? Or have you let your politics affect your faith? Jesus calls us to be world-changers and if that's not political I don't know what is! Have you accepted his call?