

**August 21, 2016**

**TEXTS: Luke 13:10–17; Jeremiah 1:4–10**

**TITLE: Politics and Prophecy**

*A sermon by the Rev. Brian D. Ellison*

I have a confession to make. I'm living a double life.

With half my time, I'm a Presbyterian minister, the executive director of the Covenant Network. I preach and teach, I work with churches and other ministers. I try to bring about change by speaking the truth.

With the other half, I'm working as...forgive me...a journalist. At our local NPR station in Kansas City, I host talk shows and a podcast, conduct interviews and do reporting; much of what I do focuses on elections and politics, especially this year.

People ask me if it's hard to do both things—switching back and forth between the prophetic and the political.

And I remember why I wanted to be a reporter back when I was a kid, as a high school reporter, becoming an editor of the college newspaper. It was a little crazy, but I actually thought that was prophetic—that being a reporter, as much as preaching, was making a living from figuring out how most fully to reveal the truth.

And the longer I'm in ministry, I'm coming to realize that no matter how much we might idealize the church as a place free from politics, no matter how fully we seek to sanitize our language of partisanship, the interchange of ideas that leads to change, that engages people for action—upsetting some and rallying others—in other words, politics—is essential, at least to who I am as a preacher.

Which is to say I lead this double life in the newsroom, *and* I lead this double life in the pulpit. Prophecy and politics. It's not switching back and forth. I do both things all the time.

And so should you. All the time. Everywhere. It's the call of every believer.

Do you think of yourself as a prophet—as prophetic? We get nervous about self-declared prophets, and perhaps rightly so. Even the word scares us.

That's all right. It scared Jeremiah, too.

It's not hard to make the case that Jeremiah is called to be a prophet. It says so right there in verse 5: "*Before I formed you in the womb...before you were born...I appointed you a prophet to the nations*" (Jeremiah 1:5). It is not only Christians and Jews who see him that way. It is a privilege to be sharing fellowship today with Muslim friends, and even though he isn't mentioned in the Qu'ran, many Muslim teachers have understood Jeremiah as a prophet, a messenger of God, as well.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> On this day in worship, the church welcomed a contingent of visitors from the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh. Earlier in the service, Imam Mufti Wasid Adjib offered a prayer for peace in Arabic and English, and more than a hundred people from the two congregations shared lunch—prepared by the Muslim congregation—after worship.

I can hear what you're thinking: Sure, okay, but being a prophet like Jeremiah isn't really my cup of tea. Actually, it wasn't even Jeremiah's cup of tea. From the very first call to speak, Jeremiah's words are words of protest: I'm too young, I don't talk so good. Jeremiah was vulnerable, afraid, meek.

But the call to be prophetic isn't a call to be articulate, it's a call to tell the truth. And so Jeremiah is admonished not to be afraid, but rather to go where he is sent, and to speak what he is given. And his vulnerability wasn't a disadvantage; that was an asset! It made him more dependent on God. Speaking not from his own wisdom and strength but with the justice and wisdom of God—that's what prophets do.

But is that political?

Maybe we need to name the problem that we hear *politics* as a dirty word. If when I say "politics" and you think of one presidential candidate or another and everything that troubles you about him or her, I can probably agree that we need to aim higher.

But if by politics, we mean standing up for things, even when they are going to make some people uncomfortable or angry...

If by politics, we mean shaping the lives of all people by wielding earthly power or condemning the powerful who wield it unjustly...

If by politics, we mean subjecting the status quo to critique and casting a vision for a new society, a different culture, a better world ...

Then yeah: Jeremiah was political.

*See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
To pluck up and to pull down,  
To destroy and to overthrow,  
To build and to plant (1:10).*

Jeremiah's ministry was not to sit in his study and craft lovely sermons, suitable for leather-bound publication. It was to get out there and shake up the world. To name the peoples' sins and the leaders' corruption.

There were some good reasons for Jeremiah to be afraid when he was called to be a prophet. There can be a cost to being political. There was for Jeremiah, whose lamentations of agony and sadness are legendary, and who would find himself a political prisoner long before that phrase existed.

But it was his calling. And it changed God's people. And changed the world as they knew it.

I hear what you're thinking again: That's not the kind of prophet I want to be. Instead, I want to be like Jesus. The nice one. The healing one.

Islam understands Jesus, too, as a prophet. We Christians worship Jesus as Savior and Lord, but also as a prophet; he was in his words and in his actions a revealer of truth. But was he political?

He certainly was on this day.

Here was a woman, challenged by a physical disability for 18 years. She did not ask Jesus for healing. Unlike many other stories of Jesus' miracles, she didn't come to him, she didn't profess

any faith, didn't come—as far as we know—necessarily know he would be there that day, or who he even was. But he singles her out, and he makes an example of her. He could have healed her quietly, or privately. But that's not what Jesus was about today; he was more than a physician, more than a healer.

He was making a statement: It was a statement about power—who has it, who should have it and how it should be used. It was a slap in the face of the earthly powerful, including the leader of that particular religious community, the one who would put regulations before people. He did it to get a reaction, and it worked. It was *very* political.

Some would say that pretty much everything Jesus did was political. From eating at the tax collector's and sinners' homes to being anointed by a woman with her hair. From parables about the distribution of wealth to actually feeding the hungry—5000 of them. From entering Jerusalem on a donkey to cries of Hosanna—"Save us!"—to standing silent before Pilate. Over and over, Jesus makes statements with words and actions that get attention, that call into question long-held assumptions, that cast a vision of a different world.

That's being political in the best sense. That's what Jesus did. And if we're going to follow Jesus, that's what we will do, too. The call of the disciple is to be both prophetic...and political.

Is that a scary thought? Do you feel like Jeremiah? "*Ah, Lord God, Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only...*"(1:6)

Only what?

What vulnerability will you cite? What tapes play in your head that tell you you can't speak truth or make change?

Am I only a boy, or a girl, too young (like Jeremiah)? Or are you too old?

Am I a minority in my sexual orientation, or my gender identity?

Am I of a religion that the culture disrespects and discriminates against?

Will I risk position or status or reputation?

There is much that could keep us from speaking truth, many threats that might intimidate us or thoughts that might paralyze us.

But against that intimidation, God says "*I am with you to deliver you. Now I have put my words in your mouth.*"

Jesus lays a hand on that paralysis and says "*You are set free from your ailment.*"

What is left for us is only to stand up straight and begin praising God.

There is one more thing to say, and it is important. For it is easy to confuse being prophetic with saying whatever we want to get a reaction. A person, a preacher, a candidate who calls himself a "truth-teller" isn't necessarily being prophetic. Sometimes politics is just politics. And when what is being said is racist or sexist or homophobic, when it uses tragedy to call for discrimination against one religious group or ethnicity. When it stirs fear without calling forth love. Well then it isn't even good prophecy *or* politics. It's a corruption of both words.

Last year, I had the privilege of interviewing Jack Danforth. He's a former senator and ambassador, a Republican from Missouri. He's also an Episcopal priest; maybe you remember he delivered the eulogy at President Reagan's funeral. He has spent his retirement from politics writing and speaking about religion and politics. First, he tried desperately to keep religion from

taking over politics, especially in his own party.<sup>2</sup> But in the last few years, and in his latest book, he has taken a different approach.<sup>3</sup> He thinks we need *more* religion in politics—but not just a narrow insistence on our own viewpoints. Rather in a conscious and constant attention to making sure we are seeking truth, living by those values and then proclaiming that agenda, rather than our own. As he writes,

Most of all, faith brings recognition that our quest never leads to certainty. We are always uncertain, always in doubt that our way is God's way. That self-doubt makes it possible to be reconciled to one another. It is faith that makes the reconciling work of politics possible.<sup>4</sup>

It is a call to be prophetic. And political.

So friends, let us be bold, but also humble. Let us be careful not to say things unworthy of a prophet, but let us also not be afraid, saying nothing at all.

Let us take Jeremiah and Jesus as our models, striving to be both prophetic and political, our words and actions daring to declare God's truth as we discern it at work and church, at home and at Bible study, in public office or the pastor's office, or wherever we may be.

And let us trust that when this and every campaign season has come and finally gone, the season of building and planting and building, by each of and by all of us together, will endure.

May it be so. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Danforth, *Faith and Politics: How the "Moral Values" Debate Divides America and How to Move Forward Together*, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> John Danforth, *The Relevance of Religion: How Faithful People Can Change Politics*, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Danforth, *Faith and Politics*, p. 53.