

September 11, 2016

TEXT: Matthew 4:5–11

TITLE: TED Talks – Political Temptation

If you're determined to give a "thumbs down" to the sermon I'm about to offer, let me help you with a few adjectives. You can say, "Randy's sermon was too abstract, too boring, too long, too preachy." And if you really want people to know your disdain, just say "It was too political. I hate it when ministers talk politics from the pulpit." When I ask my critics to be more specific about what they'd like to hear, they say, "You should talk more about Jesus, about love, and the Ten Commandments!" I reply, "You mean the Jesus who asked Pilate about the definition of truth—or Christian love that is shown by fighting for justice for our neighbors—or the Ten Commandments that warn us not to make idols of nations or flags or military power but worship and serve the Lord God only?" To which invariably comes the angry response, "There you go getting political again!"

Like it or not, the bible and politics have always had a lot to say to one another. Ultimately, it is where you stand while you have this conversation that makes all the difference in the world. Let me explain. Long ago life in ancient Greece was organized around a city-state or "pōlis." A polis was a small city built around a natural highpoint (or acropolis) and surrounded by a fortified wall. The citizens of this polis made rules about how to organize their life together. Aristotle wrote a book about how to govern a "polis" which in English is titled "Politics." Over time, governance or politics, shifted from basic theories on living together to more dangerous theories on how to hold onto power over others at all costs. Aristotle to Machiavelli. So "politics" moved from ideas about community to ideas about power. Christianity has important things to say about the former and critical things to say about the latter, so people of faith can never be silent about politics.

Now, before everyone starts worrying that what I'm about to say is going to get us into trouble with the IRS, let's bring President Johnson into the discussion. LBJ was tired of right-wing opponents raising money to fight him under the cover of being tax-exempt organizations. So in 1954, he amended the tax code to forbid tax-exempt groups from directly participating in political campaigns. LBJ wasn't thinking about churches at all, but his actions included us. In recent years, some churches have boldly defied this rule. In the last presidential election, 1600 churches proclaimed Pulpit Freedom Sunday and actively endorsed one political candidate, saying such pathetically unenlightened things as "vote for the Mormon, not the Muslim." None of those churches—in fact, no church since 2009—has been challenged by the IRS for violating the tax code by being too political. Now I'm not condoning the practice of telling people who to vote for; however, I am saying that politics—discussing the theory and practice of how we live together—will always be an important topic for people of faith.

For me, the image of the Greek polis is quite helpful. Picture yourself living inside a walled city. Picture your neighbors moving around inside those walls with you.

Then glance up to the acropolis in the center of town where the hall of government was built. It may feel like there's a lot of space between where you live and where the government is high on its hill, just like it may seem like a long way from East Liberty to Washington, D.C. Politics is how we organize ourselves in that space between us and those who write the laws governing us. Now, we can stay inside our little homes and never engage in politics, but that simply allows for those in power to have absolute control over all aspects of our life—and typically that is done in ways to protect the power and privilege of the few. Or we can leave our homes and join with our neighbors to articulate for those in the halls of government how we desire to live our lives together. Those will be conversations about politics + morals, politics + justice, and yes, politics + faith.

The bible is full of examples of people of faith who did just that, who advised those in power. The prophet Daniel advised King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon; Joseph was the main adviser of the Egyptian Pharaoh; Mordecai and Esther advised the Persian king Ahasuerus. At other times these advisers challenged those in power, like when John the Baptist challenged the policies of King Herod or the apostle Paul made his defense of the Christians before the Roman Governor Felix. Without religion, there is no moral counterbalance to the ambition of the state. Without religion, there is no clear voice calling for justice, for limiting tyranny and lifting up the needs of the powerless. Think of all the religious-political campaigns in American history: the campaign to end slavery, end child labor, the push for civil rights and marriage equality, the striving to end military aggression and wars overseas. Think of the long American tradition of clergy and church members in jail—the conscientious objectors, the lawbreakers of the Underground Railroad, the activists in the sanctuary movement and anti-nuclear protestors, of Martin Luther King, Jr. writing his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.

The point is this: Christians engage with, advise, challenge and confront those in the political arena in order to bring the moral standards of the Kingdom of God into the civic realm. We plunge into politics to put a check on oppressive authority and to offer a vision of something better—something just and compassionate—which is part of our God-given, Christ-grounded, Spirit-felt hope for our world tomorrow. How else can we follow the example of our Savior who blessed the children and said “Of such as these is the kingdom of God” while in the world children are abused, under-educated and living in poverty? How else can we embody the teachings of Christ about true forgiveness as he protected the woman about to be stoned by telling the male mob “Whoever is without sin can throw the first stone”, while in this world we lock up more people than any other civilized nation; we continue the inhuman practice of capital punishment; and day after day we gun down fellow citizens of color on our city streets. How can we stay silent on politics and still claim to follow Jesus Christ?

Having said that, here's the warning that comes in today's gospel lesson. Three times in the wilderness the devil tempted Jesus. The first time the devil tempted Jesus at ground-level, prodding him to turn stones into bread so the growling of

his empty stomach could be eased. Jesus declined to put his own needs over the divine plan of God the Creator. So then the devil took Jesus up high—first, to the pinnacle of the temple to test God’s providential care if he would throw himself down. Jesus refused to jump. Then Satan took him even higher—to the summit of a high mountain. He showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. That was a temptation to religious-political power—to be on top of the pyramid, seated on the throne, holding the key to the penthouse suite. It was a temptation to dominate others—to be the boss, the big cheese, to embrace all the worldly success and prestige we covet in this day and age.

In the book Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil we meet Miss Emma—a rich, 90 year old, white matriarch of Savannah, Georgia. One day her chauffeur drove her Mercedes limousine to the bank so she could sign some papers. But Miss Emma was in a hurry, so the bank officer was to meet her outside the bank at the curb. She had the chauffeur slow down to about 8 miles an hour, rolled down her window and had the banker hand in papers through the window for her signature. She never came to a complete stop, so the poor banker had to run alongside the car around Johnson Square in downtown Savannah until each paper had been signed and handed back to him. He pleaded, “For heaven’s sake, Emma, stop the car” but she ignored him until she was done, rolled up her window and sped off to her next appointment. O Lord, protect us from feeling a sense of entitlement like Miss Emma!

The devil wants to take each of us into the rarefied air of the powerful, so we will use our privilege and position for our own needs and neglect the needs of others. But at the height to which the devil takes you, beware not so much of altitude sickness as attitude sickness. That’s the real danger. Now I’m well aware of the fact that I’m saying this to you elevated in a raised pulpit and speaking in a cathedral whose steeple pierces the Pittsburgh sky. None of us are immune to this temptation. I know there is a different quality to my ministry when I spend all day in my office, answering e-mails, talking on the phone, doing administrative tasks efficiently and professionally and I hope caringly—as opposed to when I get out and walk around East Liberty, and see people on Penn Avenue and Broad Street, talk to folks behind the counter in Giant Eagle and CVS, offer a prayer when someone comes in our Highland Avenue door asking for a pastor, attend the recent funeral for a talented African-American colleague who carved out ministry on the streets of Homewood while battling with terminal cancer. Just like I’m sure there is a different quality in your lives depending on whether you’re on top of the world, air-conditioned, good WiFi signal, bills all paid up—or whether you’re feeling more down to earth, happy but just getting by, walking by faith not sight, seeing the world day by day from the bottom up and not the top down. Location is everything.

The devil wanted Jesus to stay up high, far above the messiness of this world, up there in a place of power. But Christ knew the God of this world is committed to ground-level ministry—to politics, activism and worship that insists on justice and

love right down here in the thick of things. In fact, the one time Christ was raised higher than everyone else was not to be seated on a golden throne, but rather to be nailed on a wooden cross. His was not the politics of elevated power, but the politics of faithful servanthood here on earth.

As I said earlier, the bible and politics always have a lot to say to one another. But ultimately, it is where you stand when you have this conversation that makes all the difference in the world. As people of faith, we must be engaged. We must speak out. We must challenge tyranny and injustice and destructive powers that harm lives around us. But we are called to do it, not from on high, but right here—at eye-level, person-to-person, heart-to-heart level, day after day. That may not be the sermon you want to hear, but church, as religious-political followers of Christ, it is what needs to be said. Thanks be to God.