

God's Politics

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
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So can we talk some about politics today?

Oh good Lord, Jim; what else do you want to talk about? Economics?

Actually I thought we'd talk religion, politics and economics today. *Today? Really? All week long we've heard Ron Paul and Paul Krugman arguing about class warfare. Yesterday police did their best to prevent protests on Wall Street. The Dow dropped 1000 points for 16 minutes on Thursday. Now we're looking at yet another possible government shut-down over debt and disaster relief and you want to talk about religion, politics and economics? What other safe subjects would you like to discuss Jim? Perhaps we could consider Palestine's bid for admission to the United Nations?*

Well, if you'd like to talk about Palestine and Israel we can. It's really not too much of a stretch.

But before anybody's blood pressure gets too high, let me start by simply offering an alternative... approach to politics. The word comes from the Greek - *politicos*, meaning of, for or relating to citizens. Generally speaking it is applied to the science or the art of running governmental or state affairs, although, as you know, politics is a reality inside of offices AND even inside of churches. *Politicos* addresses the nature of social relations within various institutions, or, better yet, communities. So try on this definition: Politics concerns itself with the values of a specific community and the social relations which will govern that community. And that is why politics matters.

What is the proper role of government? Will gays and lesbians be included in the full life and fellowship of a congregation. Can you be pro-life and also be pro-war and pro-death penalty? Those are political questions because they are about the values which will govern a particular community. What will be valued? Who will be valued? And likewise, what will not be valued and who will not be valued?

The problem is not politics. The problem has to do with the values that inform partisan politics. For example, when Sen. Daniel Moynihan of New York and Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee were in office, compromise was admired and a foundation of Washingtonian social relations. Yes, there were differences but compromise was a core value. Today, compromise is openly mocked. The process has been hijacked by dualistic mindsets. Nuance and subtlety are seen as signs of weakness which cannot be tolerated in today's Washington. What matters now are the winners. What matters is who's on top. What matters is staying there. And when the end is staying in power, politicians will adopt a variety of means to do so.

One of the most time tested methods to stay in power is to become a shape-shifter; a chameleon who can morph into whatever a particular constituency wants. Neither transparency nor integrity matters. What matters is having the right answer at the right time for the right group of people. And that is exactly what's going on in today's gospel lesson.

The religious powers who confronted Jesus were snared in the perfect political trap. If they said, John the Baptizer was a prophet from God, then questions would have followed: Why didn't you follow him? But if they said that John the Baptizer was a

nobody who had spent too much time in the desert sun, then the the public would have been outraged and re-election bids would have been at risk. Either way they lost. So as true professional politicians, these gentlemen refused to answer the question the reporter asked.

Jesus, on the other hand, was the one political creature who never worried about winning. For example, can you imagine what would happen to Romney or Perry if they were caught talking to a prostitute? Goodbye Republican nomination, right? Jesus, not only talks to her, but orders drinks and appetizers. But as crazy as Jesus' campaign was, he was determined to live, campaign and govern by a certain set of values through which he intended to initiate the Kingdom of God.

So what are these values that informed Jesus' politics? For that matter, what are the core values that informed the politics of Ezekiel and the apostle Paul. Let's start with Ezekiel and the first lesson today.

Ezekiel explicitly tells us what his political party values: Don't worship idols, even the popular ones; don't seduce a neighbor's spouse; don't indulge in casual sex; don't bully; don't pile up bad debts; don't steal; don't refuse to feed the hungry; don't refuse to clothe those poorly dressed; don't exploit the poor for the sake of the rich; don't live by impulse or greed; treat everyone the same. This, Ezekiel says, is required for salvation. Please notice that, with the exception about the prohibition of idol worship, Ezekiel says nothing about what people believe. There is no evidence, not a shred, that Ezekiel believed salvation was about an individual decision. Ezekiel would have NEVER asked, have you accepted the messiah as your personal Lord and Savior? Personal Lord and Savior? Huh? Ezekiel's God demands that we value the other. Ezekiel insists that our salvation is about the quality of our relationships. Our salvation is tied inextricably with the welfare of others and our ability and willingness to meet their needs.

But look at what happens when Ezekiel tells them that they have to concern themselves with the poor and needy. Ezekiel tells them that their salvation is interrelated with their ability to care for all of God's children, and the people of Israel scream, "No fair! That's not right!" You know what's scary? The more things change, the more they stay the same.

And then there's Paul. Paul talks about salvation but he doesn't use the word heaven when he does. Paul tells us today that we have to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. But why do we have to work it out Paul? If we're baptized; if we accept Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior doesn't that mean we go to heaven and are saved? Hardly. Paul, like Ezekiel before him, has radically different understandings of salvation than do most modern evangelicals. The salvation we are to work out with fear and trembling is not about our individual destiny. It is not about some life to come; it's not about jewels in a crown or a reward in the hereafter. Rather salvation has to do with how we live life here and now. It has to do with how we live with and love others here and now. Paul starts with the assumption that once we know the degree to which we are loved by the Holy One, we will in turn love others in similar ways. He assumes that we will see others, not as commodities to be exploited, but as brothers and sisters. We will see others not as opponents and enemies to be defeated, but as those worthy of unconditional love. Salvation has to do with our ability to live life now as did Christ. This very moment is the hour of salvation. This very day is the Day of the Lord as announced by the prophets. And since we fall short of living as true citizens of the Kingdom of God, and since there are real

consequences for our actions or lack thereof, we had best work out our salvation with fear and trembling and we had best do so day after day.

Perhaps you don't believe Paul. Or perhaps you don't understand Paul and why he talks about salvation without talking about heaven. Then let's consider Jesus. Let's consider the one who never divided people into neat dualistic categories - red or blue, liberal or conservative, believer or heathen. In the one place in Scripture he divides people, he put people who live for the betterment of others over here, and people who live for themselves over there. Don't listen to me - listen to him: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven" Matt. 7:21. And what is the will of his father in heaven? Well according to Ezekiel, according to Jeremiah and Amos and Joel and the Hebrew prophets the will of the father is for us to care for all and not just for ourselves.

So am I going to use a sermon to tell you how to vote in 2012? If you have to ask the question you don't know me very well. Is there a biblical answer as to the question of what is the proper role of government in caring for the poor and the needy? The answer is no, there is not and I know liberal and conservative Christians who make very good cases for their perspective. But I also know this. When we are more concerned about our income and our taxes than the needs of others, we are not engaged in God's politics. When we cheer for the death of someone who doesn't have health insurance, as happened in a recent political debate, we are not engaged in God's politics. Please note I didn't speak to the appropriate role of government in providing health care. I did say, when we don't give a damn about whether others have it, we are not engaged in God's politics. When we cheer for the death penalty, we are not engaged in God's politics. Please note, I didn't address whether imposing death is or is not a proper function of government. I said, when we cheer for the intentional killing of another human being, we are not engaged in God's politics. When we bully to death a 14 year old in Buffalo for wrestling with his sexuality, we are not engaged in God's politics. When we teach our children that God will bully those who wrestle with their sexuality, if not now then in the afterlife, we are not engaged in God's politics.

We can't escape politics; we're not supposed to escape them. Values will govern our nation, our city, our churches, this church, and we should seek to influence them. But how will we seek to influence them? What values will we use to govern our social relations in our community, our state, our church, our country? Will they be Christ's values?

Christ had more power than any Washington politician had ever imagined, but Christ never valued power as do we. Quite the opposite in fact. Paul tells us in Philippians that he gave it all up. He completely emptied himself so that we could be filled. He lost so we can win. And now he expects us to follow suit. After all, that is how God will be at work in us and by working in and through us God is effecting the salvation of others. When we empty ourselves so that others can be filled, then we are following the way of Ezekiel, and Paul and Jesus of Nazareth. When we act with as much concern for others as for self, regardless as to their perceived worth, THEN we will be engaged in God's politics. Amen.