

“God and Politics”
October 11, 2020

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
Matthew 22:34-40

It’s getting late in the election cycle, so, of course, God is being dragged into the conversation in the usual troubling ways.

Maybe you saw or heard about the President’s video that was released on Wednesday evening. Reporting on it, *The New York Times* said that the President, “whose skin appeared darkened by makeup and who appeared to struggle to get air at times, seemed to be saying that he had discovered, without evidence, a new drug that suddenly made him feel better and could do the same for everyone else with Covid-19.

“‘I call that a cure,’ he said, adding that everyone should have access to the not-yet-approved drug for ‘free’ and that he would make sure it was in every hospital as soon as possible.”

He concluded: “I think this was a blessing from God that I caught it,” apparently referring to the fact that he had learned about the benefits of the drug as a result of becoming ill.¹

In this case, the President was not the first to pull God into politics.

In an interview on *Tuesday*, Jane Fonda said: “I just think Covid is God’s gift to the left,” adding, “That’s a terrible thing to say”—which, of course, it is. Fonda concluded: “I think it was a very difficult thing to send down to us, but it has ripped the Band-Aid off who [Trump] is and what he stands for and what is being done to average people and working people in this country.”

Let me say this as clearly as possible to both Donald and Jane: No.

Those on the left and those on the right, please hear me: A pandemic that has killed 1,400 people in Iowa, 212,000 people in the United States, and over one million people worldwide, a pandemic that has shattered economies and lives, that has disrupted just about everything is *not* a blessing from God. It is *not* a gift from God.

The temptation, then, is to say: “Let’s just leave God out of this.”

Over the last 40 years our national political discourse has soured. Partisan lines have hardened. The usual ways in which God is brought into all of this only makes things worse.

The answer, of course, is not to simply leave God and our religious commitments out of all of this.

Some time ago E.J. Dionne put it this way: “We do not need, and should not want, to end religion’s public role. We *do* need a more capacious understanding of what that role is.

We need a more demanding standard whereby religious people live up to their obligations to religious pluralism and religious liberty by making public arguments that are accessible to those who do not share their assumptions or their deepest commitments. And we need to understand that religion offers its greatest gift to public life not when it promotes certainty, but when it encourages reflection, self-criticism, and doubt.”

Of course, we Congregationalists are in a place from which we can offer that great gift to our nation—for we affirm a faith that is not certainty; a faith that brings questions and doubt into the public square.

The Congregational understanding of Christianity does not allow us to sit quietly and pray while the world hurts and rages around us. Mixing religion and politics is nothing new for us.

Recall our history.

In the early years of New England Congregationalism, election sermons were an important part of the life of the people. Election Day itself was a great holiday in the colonies as local assemblies and colony officials were chosen for the coming year.

The day would begin with canon firing and military exercises. Then government officials would process from the seat of government to a nearby church meeting house. There the assembled power players would—what else—listen for a few hours to the “election sermon.”

UCC church historian, Barbara Brown Zikmund, tells us that election sermons generally followed a pattern.

First they asserted that civil government is founded on an agreement between God and citizens to establish political systems that promote the common good. Scripture tells us that government is necessary, but no system is perfect. Therefore, voters and rulers were told that they must do what is needed for their “peculiar circumstances.”

Second, the people were encouraged to promise to follow those they had elected, and rulers were to promise to act for the good of all. As long as rulers acted “in their proper character,” subjects were to obey. On the other hand, if rulers acted contrary to the terms of the agreement, people were “duty bound” to resist.

In all civic actions, voters and rulers were charged to promote virtue, suppress vice and support people of “proven wisdom, integrity, justice, and holiness.”²

Voting has started already—and I know some of you have already submitted your ballots—but even though it is brief, this is an election sermon—although I leave it to you to decide who is the candidate of “proven wisdom, integrity, justice, and holiness.”

Our questioning faith is needed in the political realm.

The political process is the way that communities and nations organize their common life, allocate their resources, and deal with shared problems. Politics is about the values we honor, the money we allocate, the process we follow so that we can live together with some measure of justice, order, and peace.

Politics and faith are public acts. Again and again as we open the Bible we discover God's concern with:

Honest weights and measures in the marketplace;

Judges who will not take bribes;

Leaders who seek the good of the people;

The plight of the poor and the perils of wealth;

Hospitality for strangers and foreigners;

Beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

That is to say, again and again as we open the Bible we discover God's concern with our *political* life.

For people of faith, concern with politics is never simply about the triumph of one party or another. It is one way that we try to plow God's wholeness into the soil of our history. It is a way that we seek to live out the two great commandments—loving God as we love our neighbor.

And if we are serious about the love of God and the love of neighbor, this election will stir our thoughts and our prayers and rouse us to action. We have, as did our New England ancestors in faith, our own "peculiar circumstances" that must be addressed.

As the pandemic continues unabated, how will we promote public health as well as individual well-being? Health care is a religious and political issue.

Each and every human being is created in the image of God and is of infinite worth. Human rights, racial justice—respecting the image of God in every person—are religious and political issues.

In these days of economic upheaval, how will we best gain a new foundation? Economics—and our right use of the financial resources we have—are religious and political issues.

In a time when the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow, how will we show compassion? Poverty—and caring for the poor and the vulnerable in a way that empowers—are religious and political issues.

We are stewards of the earth, caretakers of God's goodness. The environment—and protecting the creation—are religious and political issues.

Truth telling, education, immigration—all religious and political issues.

Yes, people of goodwill can and will take different positions on how these issues are to be addressed. Indeed, because we are part of the United Church of Christ—and especially because we are members of *this* congregation, where everyone's right to his or her own opinion is also a religious tenet—we will differ.

And we will continue to speak and act.

As we recognize the compassionate judgment of God on all of our actions that our light will break forth and healing shall come.

This is the point of all those 18th century election sermons—and the point of this sermon as well. Our faith keeps calling us into relationship with the rest of the world. We won't always like what we see and hear, but we are called to look and listen. We won't always get it right but we are called to raise our voices like a trumpet.

In this very troubled and hurting world, in our very troubled and hurting nation, we raise our voices when we vote. Voting is one of the most empowering, just, and peaceful actions we can take to make a difference.

Think. Pray. Vote.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/07/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-blessing.html>

² Page: 4

BBZ, *United Church News*, October 2004, pg. B10.