

# **Preaching Justice, Doing Mercy: The Gospel in the Public Square Can we, should we, and did we ever distinguish clearly between the vocations of preachers, prophets, and partisans?**

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**Can we, should we, and did we ever distinguish clearly between the vocations of preachers, prophets, and partisans?**

**Institute of Liturgical Studies**

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Thanks for coming, and as always, for the work you and your congregations and communities do in the way of nurturing and sending such smart, good young people to VU and other such schools. I'm your beneficiary, and so is the church and the world.

Given what I'm going to talk about, I should begin with one piece of humor about politics and politicians and another about prophets. The trouble with political jokes, of course, is that too many of them get elected. Then again, admirable politicians, and there are a few, have been known to be funny. Adlai

Stevenson once said of the complexities involved in his line of work, "A lie is an abomination unto the Lord, and a very present help in trouble."

Prophets were notoriously humorless characters. You'd have never, ever wanted Jeremiah, Obadiah, or Ezekiel at a party. I didn't have many prophet jokes in my files, just a one-liner that says, "Atheism is a non-prophet religion," and something about a kid who supposedly explained that Elijah poured water on the altar in the contest with Baal prophets because he wanted to make gravy with his sacrifice. If you Google, "a prophet walks into a bar," you get a raft of jokes about the prophet Muhammed, and I didn't want a fatwa against me, so I closed down the screen.

Actually, one of the issues I want to address is something that makes the following story at least somewhat amusing. So, one piece of alleged humor:

*Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed monitor of the church's morals, couldn't keep from sticking her nose in other people's business. Most members did not approve of her vigilante activities but feared her enough to maintain their silence. She made a mistake, however, when she accused Frank, a new member, of being an irresponsible drunk after she saw his old pickup parked in front of the town's only tavern one afternoon. She emphatically told Frank (and several others) that everyone who saw it there knew full well what he was doing. Frank, a man of few words, merely listened, looked Mildred in the eye, turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. Later that evening, Frank quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house... Walked home... And left it there all night.*

In any case, LITURGY AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE is this year's ILS

theme, and in this break-out session, Preaching and the Public Square, or The Gospel in the Public Square. . . I hope to have conversation with you, not talk for the whole time. I have prepared a handout, which I'll send around later, and I have something of a presentation to precede both discussion and handouts. It begins with a confession that's also a cautionary tale.

My own politics are somewhat left of center. I generally favor regulation over deregulation. I think social security is a good idea, not a national disgrace. I would vote for a health care system that assumes everyone, not only the rich, should get the best care we know how to give. In 40-plus years as a voter, I have missed one presidential election (while out of state to attend a funeral), but I have only voted for two presidents that won. My family recycles everything we possibly can, I print my sermons and lectures on scrap paper, and we learned at Holden Village not to flush our toilets-unless we had to. I'm against the Iraq war, oppose the death penalty, and consider it a national obscenity that every angry person in this country who needs to express outrage seems to have an AK-47 ready to make a killing field of some workplace, school, or shopping mall. My prophets include Wendell Berry, Garrison Keillor, and David James Duncan.

I have a brother a bit younger than me who looks enough like me to be my twin. He has spent his adult life in the Marine Corps, beginning with a stint in the jungles of Vietnam and ending with retirement a year ago after a decade in Marine Corps headquarters in the Pentagon. He believes that military intervention is the quickest and best solution to most of the world's problems, that the United States was founded on conservative Christian principles, and that the right to bear arms is the most important right in this nation because it guarantees our having all the others. He decries the

encroachment of developers on lands where he loves to hunt, but he thinks global warming is a hoax perpetrated by the bad science of liberal academics. His prophets include Rush Limbaugh, G. Gordon Liddy, and pretty much everyone who works for Rupert Murdoch.

I write a bi-weekly newspaper column on a range of topics you might call "religion in the public square," and I send it via e-mail to far-flung family members. My brother quickly corrects about half of them.

We have the same mother and father and grew up in the same house, had the same confirmation teacher (our dad) and learned the faith from the same people. We both have high blood pressure, irregular heartbeats, and several other common health concerns, and we're both doing our best to survive. Neither of us wants to die any time soon, we both worry about our aging mother, and we're both puzzled and chagrined at the state of the world. And we love each other even though there are many things we can't talk about for very long.

I think my politics are better than his politics, but I know one thing for certain, that it's not the gospel, nor the faith of the body of Christ into which each of us have been baptized, that my politics are better than his, or his than mine. And I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that I have no business preaching in a gathering of the Christian assembly, when my role is to preach the gospel, that my politics are better than his or anyone else's, and that the sooner I and my fellow-partisans take over the better off we'll be. My job as preacher is NOT to run my brother out of any circle, including the church.

I'm old fashioned enough to believe that we are both hopelessly flawed and incompetent as deities and that if given the chance, each of us could and would run our own lives and the world into

some terrible ditch. If you listen closely to me or to my brother on matters of the public square, you will find in each of us a quest for justice, but also very significant doses of fear and anger at the heart of each drive for justice.

I've been part of communities where only one kind of politics was tolerated, and where the worship life of the community was designed to expose the faults of all who oppose us, to authorize our own set of opinions and solutions, and to condemn all other viewpoints. Those have invariably been communities that lived out of the law, not the gospel.

I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that my job as a preacher in the assembly is indeed to diagnose all the fear and anger and the true and shameful origins of much of our justice-seeking. However, I believe that it's not my job to diagnose someone else's sin, but my own, and to lay myself and my community, dead in our trespasses and sins, before God's mercy, there to find the crucified one already with us on our side of all that's gone wrong in the world.

But we never stay there, immobilized in death. Weekly, nay daily, we hear the crucified one say, "Take up your cross, come with me. Let's find our lives by losing them." He does NOT say, "Let's find our lives by being right about everything while all those other bozos are wrong," but instead, "let's give our lives away in service." THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE ARE NOT ABOUT BEING RIGHT-WHETHER RIGHT AS LIBERALS OR RIGHT AS CONSERVATIVES-BUT ABOUT DYING, AND GIVING OUR LIVES AWAY.

Rarely has there been more public conversation in this country about the relationship of politics and religion (and by extension about the gospel) in the public square than during the current presidential campaign. And now, just in time for this session on proclamation, we have all witnessed the aftermath of

a few politically charged sermons becoming a major issue in the public square. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama's longtime pastor and the subject of much of this discussion right now, preached a few years ago in the Chapel of the Resurrection here at Valparaiso University. Technically, he was a speaker-for Martin Luther King Day convocation that's a part of our annual commemoration of MLK. But as some of you know, Jeremiah Wright never merely speaks. He always preaches. What he preached here at VU sounded much in the tradition of MLK himself. It was very biblical, and genuinely Christian in tone and content. It was also prophetic. It surely wasn't anti-American or paranoid (as were the now-famous "God damn America" rant and the suggestion about HIV as a white plot against blacks).

In my estimation, Jeremiah Wright has become a lightning rod because he has played the role of prophet in at least some of his public discourse. I have never attended his church though I have watched his televised worship services a few times. Most of what I've witnessed has been exhortation to live in certain ways. I know from many things written in the aftermath of Fox News and YouTube revelations, including one very informative piece by Martin Marty, that he regularly preached the gospel and did not merely present himself as a prophet. Tragically, however, no one can hear Wright's gospel any more-only his partisan denunciations and encouragement. Such is the plight of prophets and would-be prophets.

Waxing prophetic is quite different from preaching the gospel. Preachers for the most part are seminary-trained, and seminaries train preachers, not prophets. Indeed, you can't train a prophet. They just "happen." God calls them and they can't do otherwise than what they do, always at the cost of their reputations and sometimes at the cost of their lives. They're never respected in their own lands, and their stuff never gets canonized in their lifetimes. As the Bible itself says, one must

always wait a while with prophets, to see if their message (and not just their “predictions”) proves true. Only time will tell if a prophet was genuine, and all the Bible’s prophets died rejected. Nevertheless, prophecy has long been mixed up with gospel-preaching, at least the O.T. sort. Cf. the hopeful materials in Jeremiah or Isaiah-e.g., Isaiah 40-55.

Many preachers love to say that their job is “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” The trick, of course, is to know the difference. But an even wiser approach, I submit, is to assume that in every listener there lives a soul both comfortable in its own rightness and afflicted with fear that even all that rightness really won’t help in the long run. Besides, we have only one message, and it’s meant for all. I needn’t afflict the comfortable. Life itself, and the brutality of the public square, will take care of that very effectively, sooner or later. We’re there with ruined hands and a crucified Christ’s love when affliction happens.

In addition, a few bullet points, in no particular order:

- When we take political stands in our preaching, or preach justice and political righteousness, we inadvertently teach self-righteousness, I believe. We let ourselves believe, and we teach others, that there are some things we and they can do about which we can say, “Well, at least for this Christ needn’t have died. Those others must repent, but not me.” In so doing, we dishonor Christ and his death. We don’t need his pathetic solution, the cross. No, we can please God and run the world by our own light, thank you.
- Claiming to know the mind of God on any controversial issue is terribly risky for several reasons. It appears to claim a rightness and righteousness that no sinner can claim, and it runs the risk of dividing the church over

something other than the gospel.

- Seeking justice is, in Lutheran terms, participation in God's left-handed work. It's a part of sinning boldly, not a part of the means of grace, which is God's right-handed work, to which preaching the gospel properly belong.
- Most of those who make issues of the so-called public square the center of their preaching and proclamation seem mostly interested in diagnosing other people's sins, and especially those that have to do with sex. To my mind, the intense energy in some church circles given over to fighting against abortion and gay marriage, for example, represents a curious preoccupation with other people's sex lives and an insistence on scrutinizing others' sins rather than one's own.
- My professional guild, namely, scholars of biblical studies, mostly produces books on politics these days. Post-colonial interpretation is all the rage. We're all against the empire. E.g., I received a recent gift: Crossan's *God & Empire: Jesus against Rome, Then & Now*. The point of so much of this is that Jesus was essentially a political figure, and the message of the New Testament is first of all political. It's there to help us cast the mighty down from their thrones and send the rich away empty. . .so we can take over, I suppose. [This is an old issue, actually. Luke's gospel faced the task of handling the charge that Jesus and his followers were tax rebels and rabble-rousing insurrectionists bent on undermining Rome. All the passion narratives have their own way of depicting what kind of "king" Jesus was. And the temptation stories in Luke and Matthew speak strongly to the misunderstanding of Jesus' messianic mission as one of conventional politics-see especially the temptation to bow to Satan in order to have the kingdoms of the world. The bread temptation is political in some ways, too, for it



seems to assume a notion that if we only had enough, the world would be fixed.]

- I suspect that my guild colleagues no longer believe in anything but justice. Indeed, many of the most prominent are agnostics (and some are merely Biblepreneurs-my term, not theirs, obviously). I suspect, too, that some colleagues in the ministry don't believe any longer that forgiveness, reconciliation, and comfort for penitent hearts are relevant. So, in an effort to talk about things that will actually make a difference in folks' lives, they exhort folks to join them in a particular stand on political matters.
- To preach as though justice and bread are the be-all and end-all of what needs to be done, especially for poor people, is to patronize the poor and treat them as less than fully human. No matter whether we are rich or poor, we are selfish, self-righteous, frightened, and dying. We all need to have law and gospel proclaimed in our hearing, so that the Spirit might call, gather, enlighten and sanctify each and all of us regardless of our economic status.
- How then should we preachers address the brothers (and sisters) of the rich man who left crumbs for Lazarus but never invited him in to dine at the table? As Jesus said, they have Moses and the prophets. If they won't listen to them, then won't listen to us either, just because we've been baptized, died with Christ and Lazarus, and been raised to a new life on the other side of baptism (Luke 16:19-31).

The story of the Temptation in Wilderness assists us in finding our role. Christ saw to the feeding of the world, the healing and protection of those who might fall from cliffs and temple pinnacles, and the Pax Christus not by the direct routes the tempter suggested, but by going the way of the cross. Instead of

changing the world, he gave his life and breathes his Spirit upon us to change us. Now, that same work, through the preaching of the gospel, is our work.