**Religion and Politics**

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

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Rev. John Suk, PhD

We have all been there, at a Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner, when Uncle Martin or Aunt Sally said something like, “I just can’t stand how the United Church supports gay rights,” or, “I just love how the United Church supports the Palestinians against Israeli occupation.”

When we hear such things, we often look at our plates, move peas around, and wonder whether we dare respond. Maybe someone takes Martin or Sally on, and argues; or maybe a deadly silence falls upon the feast. Neither outcome builds family harmony. Religion and politics—and especially both together—don’t always make for polite table talk.

And yet, religion and politics are inseparably bound. For Jews and Christians, as well as people of all religions, it has always been so. So, we have to talk. Like Matthew does, in today’s legend from scripture.

King Herod—a ruthless puppet of the Roman military occupation—King Herod hears that a new king has been born. Herod hears this from three foreign astrologers whose religion includes reading omens in the stars. Herod does not want a new king—he thinks Israel has a pretty good one, already, in himself. So, when the wise men run without spilling the beans, Herod kills all the babies in Bethlehem, hoping the new king is among them. This massacre, though not the specific topic of this message, is one of the saddest stories in the Bible.

Religion and politics are inseparably bound. The Old Testament is also full of both, usually sparring with each other. For example, after escaping Egypt, God gave Israel judges—a divinely, appointed judiciary. God didn’t want Israel to have a political king. God was king enough. The most famous Judges were Samson, Gideon, and Deborah.

But Israel preferred a real king. God warned the Israelites that such kings would bring warhorses and forced labor, a military draft and high taxes. But the Israelites insisted. So, they got kings and things became very messy after that. King David offered ruinous wars and adulterous murders and invited divine plagues. King Solomon brought high taxes and labor camps and civil war. And those were two of Israel’s better politicians.

Eventually, the Old Testament ends with religious prophets like Isaiah and Amos condemning the political establishment for high taxes, for thievery, for idolatry, for oppressing the poor, for murdering enemies, and for putting on nice religious shows instead of seeking justice and righteousness first. In the Old Testament, religion and politics are inseparably bound.

So it was with Jesus himself. After growing up as a political refugee in Egypt and Nazareth, Jesus became—like all of Israel’s prophets before—a political agitator. The Roman occupiers eventually executed Jesus for his political crimes. After all, Jesus sparked riots in the temple. He made fun of Caesar by riding a donkey into Jerusalem as a satiric commentary on Roman triumphal parades. He threatened the cozy relationship between the leaders of the people and Pilate.

After Jesus, the apostles Paul and Peter served prison time for fomenting rebellion against Rome, and were eventually executed for it. The book of Colossians portrays Jesus as a cosmic alternative to the Roman Emperor. The book of Revelation is a lightly veiled diatribe against Rome. Religion and politics are inseparably bound.

Well, and there is all of history since. The Roman and *Holy* Roman empires often used the church to secure the obedience of their peoples and to fight internal conflicts. The church sponsored crusades against Muslims both for glory and profit. The Vatican had an army that trampled through Italy. Dutch Protestants fought Spanish Catholics in the Eighty-year War. Catholics slaughtered thousands of Protestants on St. Bartholomew’s Day.

Less than 100 years ago, my Dutch grandfather, then a very poor farm laborer, was told by his church elders that he had to vote for the Christian “anti-revolutionary” party. So, he did. My grandfather was an obedient son of the church, after all. But walking home from the voting booth, my grandfather would pray that the socialists would win.

Now, all around the world, religion and politics are more inseparably bound than ever. Shiite Muslims and Sunni Muslims are always at the verge of—or actually engaged in war. Religion of a very evil sort inspires terrorists. No Muslim nation wants Muslim Rohingya. In India, the ruling Hindu party is stoking tensions with Indian Muslims and Christians, and violence against these minorities is on the rise. Putin uses the Russian Orthodox Church to undermine the Ukraine. In China, Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities are being interned in reeducation camps—concentration camps—by the communists. And I haven’t even mentioned the military occupation of Buddhist Tibet.

I am not saying that religion causes these global political conflicts. But religion is often deeply implicated, or used, or persecuted by the state. In recent history, from the Balkans to Northern Ireland to Syria, the world is full of governments willing to inflame religious grievances to score a political advantage. Politics and religion remain inseparably bound.

It is somewhat more relaxed here in Canada—somewhat. United Church members are not on the verge of starting a civil war against Catholics or Muslims. But when I was an evangelical pastor in my first church, all of our members signed petitions to the provincial government to keep stores closed on Sundays so that it could be a Biblical day of rest. The denomination I belonged to fought for Native Canadian self-determination and against both pipelines and choice.

Presently, Jason Kenny and Andrew Scheer, both conservative Catholics, pay especially close attention to the orthodox Catholic views on sex, choice, and education in order to please part of their base.

Meanwhile, the United Church takes very public stands against racism and for reconciliation with First Nations; against Israeli occupation and for gay rights and the environment. Rightly or wrongly, the United Church is often charged with being the NDP at prayer. And frankly, sometimes it is.

So, since religion and politics are inseparably bound, now what? To be honest, I don’t always know. But I have some ideas. For example, common sense suggests that families are very important, and that turkey dinners are for creating and maintaining bonds of affection. If religion and politics are not going to do that at your family gathering, it is probably wise to avoid those topics in that setting, at least.

I think, actually, the same applies to church congregations. That is, we are supposed to build ties of love and affection with each other, and for our neighbours. So, partisanship from the pulpit is usually a bad idea. It leads to family fights. Not even Jesus publicly denounced the Roman Empire, even though his parables and teaching undermined it.

And yet, unlike Jesus, we live in a democratic society that invites our opinions, and takes them seriously. Being a good citizen requires our participation in politics. Furthermore, some crises are so intense that the church, like Amos or Isaiah, should be prophetic. The United Church was, for example, when it came to LGBTQ rights, even though this was at great cost to the denomination. And while we might not like the remedies the United Church suggests for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we should be willing to demand justice from both sides.

So where does all this leave us, when both the Bible and Jesus are deeply political? Well, here is a thought. We ought, as individuals, take the time and energy to bring our faith-shaped values to bear on our personal political involvement. Hopefully we can do so with more tact and wisdom than Uncle Martin and Aunt Sally demonstrated—but if politics and religion are inseparably bound, then our personal politics ought to be informed by our religious convictions.

We ought to be individually engaged as Christians in politics. While you’re at it, be polite. Be kind. Be gentle as doves but as wise as snakes, as Jesus suggests. But join political parties. Show up at riding associations or town hall meetings with your local politicians. Become informed about the issues and vote. Write letters. Talk to your MP and MPP. Support non-profit political organizations whose aims you agree with. Maybe the Urban League. Or Greenpeace. Or the Nature Conservancy. Or Human Rights Watch.

Not simple answers, I know. But some things in life are difficult, and do require careful, case by case, judgements: what sort of cancer treatments you want; whether or not to start a new business; what school to go to or major to choose. Life is complicated.

But to refuse to engage is to say that our faith doesn’t count for the big issues in life, and that the big issues in our lives cannot be resolved, in part, by appeal to our core values.

So rather than hide our heads in the sand from an ever-present reality—namely that religion and politics are inseparably bound—we ought individually, and in discussion with each other—face up to this reality. And when we do, we should do so as people shaped by the values that Jesus taught us: hospitality, compassion, love, justice, and peace.

Religion and politics are inseparably bound, and our mission, should we accept it, is to do our best to make religion and politics work together for human flourishing.