

## HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/24/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

In a recent conversation, someone said to me that, although JESUS' preaching and teaching may have had some political implications, JESUS was not a political figure. I didn't get to question this statement further so I'm not sure what was meant by "political figure." If it means that JESUS was not directly involved in government, I would agree. But if it means that JESUS' words and actions were not political, I might have to object.

You see, it's important to understand the context in which JESUS said things. We live in a society that tries to separate church from state (government). But in Palestine (Israel) in JESUS' day, church and state were one in the same. The Sanhedrin, their equivalent of our Congress, was made up of members of the high priestly family, scribes (religious experts), and religious laymen. Each town could have their own Sanhedrin and there was one national Sanhedrin. (Think federal vs. state or local government.) The head of the Sanhedrin was the high priest of Israel. It functioned as the supreme religious, legislative, and educational body for the Jews. Further, when the Bible refers to the law, it is talking about the law that GOD gave to Moses and its interpretation, which was done in JESUS' day by the Sanhedrin. Therefore, in the time of JESUS, you couldn't separate the religious from the political. They were one and the same. So, when JESUS said or did something that challenged the religious laws and practices of the time, HE was also challenging the politics of HIS day. This also helps us to understand why the religious leaders were so anxious to get rid of JESUS.

There is much that JESUS said and did that challenged religious practices and, thereby, also confronted what was political. Or, perhaps HE was challenging the political, and therefore what was religious. Though I think, because HE did these things in an effort to present the will of GOD, it is better understood as more religious than political, but again, since you can't really separate the two, JESUS was making political statements.

One of the most obvious examples of this is when JESUS was asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. The Romans occupied Palestine and required that its citizens pay taxes to the government. But because the Romans were foreigners, they were considered by religious Jews to be unclean. Paying these taxes was abhorrent for Jews because it not only supported the occupying military, it meant interacting with them by paying them with the money the Romans minted. Thus, JESUS' response to "give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and give to GOD the things that are GOD'S" is both political and religious.

Cleanliness was important to the Jews as you could not enter into GOD'S presence in an unclean manner. Therefore, if you associated with the unclean, you were to avoid the worship of GOD until you had purified yourself. When JESUS talked with the Samaritan woman at the well, or healed lepers, or ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, HE was breaking the religious/political laws. So, too, healing on the sabbath violated the religious/political rules of HIS day. Much of what JESUS did challenged the religious teachings of HIS time and therefore, because you can't separate religious from political, HE was also making political statements.

But what about today? Would JESUS make political statements if HE lived in our country in our time? I think HE would, because I think HIS position on a number of issues would challenge political

perspectives today. (There's not as much separation of church and state as we might like to think there is in our country when it comes to morale issues.) Take JESUS' story of the Good Samaritan. When JESUS told that story, HE challenged thinking of the JEWS listening to HIM then as to what was more important: legal/religious purity or care for those in need. When JESUS asked the religious lawyer who first questioned HIM who was neighbor to the man had been robbed (believers in GOD were called to care for one's neighbor, and that was anyone in need), the lawyer can't/won't even say, "the Samaritan," because Samaritans were so hated by the Jews. (The Samaritans' Jewish ancestors had married their Assyrian capturers during the Assyrian exile and their offspring were called Samaritans.) I wonder who JESUS would have made the hero of that parable if HE told it to us today. Who would be the loathed and reviled individual that JESUS would have elevated to the crowd? A Republican when told to a Democratic audience? A Democrat when told to a Republican audience? Or would it be someone else who is hated and/or looked down upon today? An LGBTQ+ individual? A person of color? It probably would depend on the audience, but I suspect JESUS would challenge our thinking about those we may despise or discriminate against today, because that is not how GOD wants us to view and to treat people. In GOD'S eyes, all are children of GOD and like any good parent, GOD wants us to treat each other as we would want to be treated. I don't know if JESUS was a political figure, but HE certainly said and did many things challenged the politics of HIS day.

In CHRIST'S love,  
Pastor Jeffrey