

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/16/2024

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

How would you feel about a political sermon on Sunday morning? Or an article on a political theme? Many likely would rather not receive such a message. Many feel that the separation of church and state works both ways and should not happen in church.

Let me explain the difference between “political” and “politics.” While on vacation, I attended a church where the pastor invited a member up to the front. Though the man didn’t speak, the pastor told the congregation that the man was running for office, that he was a really good guy who supported his church and tithed, and that they should consider supporting him in the upcoming election. While it was clear to me that the pastor was walking a fine line between church and state (an endorsement of a candidate would put the church’s tax-exempt status at risk), this presentation was about politics. An endorsement of a candidate is politics, but a challenge of government actions or encouragement to vote is political.

It has been estimated that 60% of what JESUS said and did in the Bible was political. We miss that, however, because we are not situated in the same political environment as the people of JESUS’ time and place. Some messages are clear, but we can miss many others. When JESUS says, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” that is a political statement. When JESUS tells Pilate, “You would have no power over ME if it were not given you from above,” that also is political. Less obvious is when JESUS saves the woman caught in adultery from being stoned and says, “Neither do I condemn you.” HE was challenging the law of the day which said anyone caught in adultery was to be stoned to death. When JESUS proclaimed that “the Kingdom of GOD has come near you,” this also was political because he was proclaiming a new kingdom over the old. By the way, HE said this in the synagogue, but that’s okay because they didn’t have the separation of church and state back then. In fact, the Sanhedrin which was the equivalent of our Congress was made up of priests, religious lawyers, and others from the church. No separation. I think there are those today who would like to see religion have more control over government, but that, again, would violate a foundational principle of our country: the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion guaranteed in the Constitution.

There are times when messages in church can take on a political quality. “Love your enemies and pray for those who hate you” can have implications for us, especially when we are at war. “Love the foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt,” can inform our thinking about immigration and border issues. There are many examples of JESUS caring for the poor and elevating women and children. These can be political priorities. HE gave examples of non-violent resistance like turning the other cheek and giving, not only your cloak but also your shirt to one who demands it.

The thing that makes it difficult to discern the words and actions of JESUS as political is that HE rarely did or said overtly political things. HE didn’t act like other political leaders of HIS day, or ours. HE rarely weighed into political issues. But HIS lifestyle and HIS teaching were filled with political implications. JESUS’ life ended in a political execution because HE challenged the status quo of the political leaders of HIS time. JESUS was political, just not in the way we think about it today. So, we should not be surprised if we find our politics confronted by something JESUS said or did. These occasions, though, are gifts that allow us to rethink how we will follow JESUS.

In CHRIST's love,
Pastor Jeffrey