

**Gospel and the Community: Town Hall**  
***Delivered September 9, 2012***

The church in which I was raised had a very strong political undercurrent that ran through Sunday School classes, sermons, prayer nights, and the conversations that took place before and after services. Our particular value system was a Republican, conservative one and it expressed a very strong influence on my life throughout my early years. I can remember essentially thinking as a high school and college student that to be a good Christian you had to be a good Republican as well.

At the time that I was not fully conscious of those implications, but it certainly seeped into the way that I saw myself, especially when I got to a very liberal college where I was definitely in the minority. The running undercurrent of my life, even as a political science major at Bates, was that if Christians were politically active as a group we might be able to set America back on the right path again. So we baptized our politics with our faith and talked about voting for the right leaders and the right laws, and against the wrong leaders and the wrong laws. I thought we were fighting politically for a more “Christian America”, which seemed like a good thing to me.

Over time I found myself increasingly disenchanted with that vision of what we were supposed to be and do as followers of Jesus. I began to question whether or not I was supposed to be identifying myself as part of a political movement or if God was after something deeper from me. I even started to believe that you could be a Democrat and still follow Jesus.

Political apathy set in and I started to feel like I probably shouldn't bother much with politics at all. The election cycle and all the hysteria on the news about this political maneuver and that government policy exhausted me to no end. I'll confess, I didn't even want to vote in the last presidential election because there didn't seem to be any honest alternative, and it didn't seem that my vote would really matter much at all in the end. I went from thinking politics could solve the issues facing our nation to thinking that the political solutions could basically be ignored.

I think many of us might find ourselves resonating with one of those ideals or another. Some of us may feel like we should work for a political solution to the deep issues facing our nation because we think that better government would lead to a better nation. Others of us may feel so disgusted with the whole thing that we just want to throw up our hands and say “why bother?”

When we talk about politics and government, we tend to focus on the larger picture – the national or global political scene, rather than the smaller picture. We think more about the White House than we do about Town Hall. It's much more glamorous to think about the national politics because that gets all the spotlight coverage. But it's also easier to focus there because it's easier to talk about platforms than talk to people.

Throughout this series we want to wrestle with the issue of what the gospel of Jesus demands of each of us when we claim to follow him in various areas of our community. We want to listen closely to the teachings of Jesus to consider how following Jesus is meant to shape our thinking and interactions with our community. We will feel the tension that following Jesus places on us – the tension between creating a community separate from the world and attempting to change the world by our community.

Politics and government seem to be one of the stickiest, touchiest places to deal with that tension; especially in a presidential election year. It is a cardinal rule of American culture that above all things you must not mix faith and politics. There's a strong sentiment that if you mix faith and politics you have somehow violated the first amendment, even though it's a rather foolish contention. But the question remains: how does a follower of Jesus look at the intersection between the gospel and our community in the political arena?

We should probably begin by acknowledging that the word we use to talk about the message of Jesus, gospel, is at least in part a political word. In the original Greek language the word is *euangelion* and often had to do with good political or even military news being shared amongst correspondents and historians. In one letter written about him, Caesar Augustus was referred to as the "Absolute Sovereign of Gospels" and was himself considered a god.

But as was so often the case Jesus spun this word in a totally different direction. So when Jesus describes his ministry in Matthew he talks about preaching the "good news of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 4:23). He understands that his message is good news about a different god, and a different kingdom, where the sovereign and good rule of the one true God would be expressed on earth even as it is in heaven.

So while it is a political term, Jesus applies it to his followers differently. The Kingdom he announces doesn't function like any kingdom they knew. When he stands before Pilate to be questioned prior to his crucifixion he states plainly his understanding of his Kingdom: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place." (John 19:36) In other words, the gospel of his kingdom is not about boundaries, governments, militaries or cultures, but about a Kingdom that doesn't belong to this world.

At the same time, the entrance of that Kingdom of Heaven into the world has consequences in this world, including the political sphere. When Jesus is confronted by some of the religious leaders about paying their taxes to Caesar, he answers in his most famous political proverb: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (Mark 12:17) Following Jesus did not remove the demands of the government on its people – he said they should give taxes to the king because it was his prerogative to tax his citizens. But they should more importantly give all of themselves – heart, soul, mind and strength – to God, because that was his prerogative. The gospel brings these two worlds together, affecting our relationship to God, and to our government. The gospel creates people who are being transformed by an encounter with Jesus who become agents of change within the world.

Paul will later elaborate on this statement in his letter to the Romans writing, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." (Romans 13:1) Believe it or not, God not only is aware of who are leaders are, he actually intends for them to be there. This is true on the national scale and on the local one as well. We submit to our leaders not because they are perfect but because we have made a choice to submit to and trust in God's sovereignty in the world, trusting that his purpose will prevail because those who are in authority are also under God's authority, whether they acknowledge it or not.

The most subversive political action is to trust that this is actually true. We could show that we trust it is true by doing what Paul tells us to in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 where he urges us that “petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.” God is looking for us to engage politically by praying – with thanksgiving even – for those who hold positions of authority because they need our prayer for their policy decisions and their personal decisions.

In that vein, Titus 3:1-2 has perhaps the best advice of all for us in our thinking about political engagement: “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.” It’s an instruction that is grounded in the change that the gospel produces in us, not just the change we want to see in someone else. When the good news about Jesus transfers the citizenship of our lives into another kingdom, the Holy Spirit begins to produce goodness, keeps us from foolishly tearing someone else down, and causes us to be gentle towards everyone.

When we see politics and government only on the national scale, and ignore the local government we slip away from this very easily. We see platforms and ideologies that we don’t like, and we want to tear them down, misunderstanding that sometimes in our political zeal we lose sight of the gospel’s demands for personal transformation that would lead to larger scale transformation.

What if we decided that in our community, with our town leaders, we would always be the people who are ready and willing to do good? What if we decided that the best way to ignite change in the political system was to allow the gospel’s power to transform lives one person at a time? What if we decided that we weren’t going to slander and speak evil of our local leaders, but instead be known as peaceable, gentle people who are always willing to work for good in our community? Maybe that would inject some much needed grace and goodness into a process that is too often marked by slander and discord. It might change our town hall, our community, and eventually might trickle up. It’s a spiritual revolution with political consequences rather than the other way around.

I hope this morning that we are calling you to a different kind of political engagement than you might be used to. It’s not the apathetic and ignorant route. It’s also not the political savvy route that sees a political revolution as the means to a spiritual end. It’s the call to engage in politics as a stewardship of the opportunity God has given us to influence our community not just through policies but through people.

To be specific, perhaps this year you should give up on spending all that time forwarding emails and instead take the time to set up a meeting for coffee with one of the Town Council members, or a School Committee member and ask what they need from you as a citizen concerned about the community. Maybe you could take the time to pray for them before you meet and let them know that you are praying that God would help them carry the burden they carry every day. Maybe you could commit to speaking well of them even when you think they’re doing the wrong thing and see what effect the gospel might have on them and others as a result.

We have an opportunity to engage in a constructive way with our government, and the gospel demands that we take that seriously. We need to throw our energy into a spiritual revolution that will have political consequences.