

Sermon: The Politics of Love

Micah 6:8; Luke 10:25-37

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and redeemer. Amen

Jesus said to the man: “You shall **love** the lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind...and your neighbor as yourself.” Paul, the great servant Paul, wrote to the Corinthians: “...*Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; love is not arrogant or rude...it is not irritable or resentful...it rejoices in the right, it bears all things, it hopes all things, it endures all things...faith hope and love abide, these three...but the greatest of these is love.*” *God so loved the world.....* I’m not sure that any more defining words have ever been spoken...even to us 21st century Christians...we and so many of the faithful other...affirm it all of the time...Yea, we ought to love each other...make love not war... Why is it we are not a more loving world? Why is it that we faith pilgrims still believe in the possibility of an agape style loving world...particularly in the face of all the rancor, the racism, the diabolical economic and social realities all about us...to say nothing of the political realities that **almost, note I say almost**, insure the inevitability of more poverty more disillusionment and more war...

In 1992, I was in Washington D. C. working on health care reform issues with then First Lady Hillary Clinton...and the Dalai Lama was also visiting in Washington where he told President Clinton, in a private meeting at the White House: “*You are the most powerful man in the world. Every decision you make should be motivated by compassion...what you Christians call Love.....*” The politically powerful motivated by a moral dictum based on an Agape kind of love... would not that be a breath of fresh air!!!! Well.... In reality, you and I, each of us, are the most powerful persons in our own world... we too would do well to follow this audacious advice of Jesus, of Paul, indeed of Micah....

Mahatma Gandhi said that there are 7 blunders causing most of the violence that plagues our world: **Wealth without work; pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character; commerce without morality; science without humanity; worship without sacrifice and politics without principles POLITICS WITHOUT PRINCIPLES....**

I submit to you that if there are those who dislike the United States, and to be sure there are those who dislike us such dislike might be found in some of these great missteps that Ghandi alluded to.... failing to love God expects our love to transcend ideological differences and God perhaps expects us to respond to human suffering and injustice wherever and whenever it may found.... I don’t know how to read the scriptures any other way... **I think that old sage Micah hit the nail on the head...”He has showed you what is good...What does the Lord require of you...to do justice...and to love kindness... and to walk humbly with your God.**

You and I have this tag around our necks...we are United Methodist by flavor and perhaps favor...but we are those whose founder John Wesley, took the church and the gospel to those who sadly sat outside because their station in life did not allow them on the inside.... He is the one who said “...there is no gospel but the social gospel”.....we favor scripture but we read it through the mind of reason, we read and interpret it through our personal experience and all of those traditions on whose solid planks we stand.... that is Wesleyan Quadrilateral but having said all that...there are those condemning us because of our spirituality if you will, our ethos of love for others, this AGAPE (this Christ like style of love) they say is secondary to our love for buildings and our love for programs and our love of money and they condemn us for our rather bland irrelevance in today's world.....

I am pretty sure the condemnation is not accurate, yet in some ways we must own it.... our loving concern has indeed found it difficult going when it comes to pursuing the political dimensions of this love. ...two things you're never supposed to talk about in polite company are politics and religion...but I know a few of you out there and indeed you are polite company, I shall become less so and talk about them anyway.... Ted Jennings in his new book *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*; says that :”...Despite all that could and should be credited to Methodism, it has become a mirror and an instrument of the reign of Mammon...(money)...He believes that Methodism, despite the intentions of its founder, has “ basked in the upward socioeconomic mobility of its members...making the middle class the object of its solicitous regard.....Methodism he says has made itself hostage to the dream of denominational success and influence, perverting stewardship into a temple tax and appropriating the management and organizational models of institutional maintenance and growth.... ” Concern for the oppressed he says has been marginalized, placed not at the center but at the periphery of our institutional life and commitment. ” This is a tough indictment ... I am not sure I buy it all, but I confess to my own guilt at perpetuating a bit of that sentiment.... At the very beginning of our United Methodist Discipline...the book that governs the polity and governance of our church...John Wesley is quoted as saying...”*there is no gospel except the Social Gospel*” and I believe that fully...

Rev. Gil Caldwell used to say that some of our faithful are so tied to the literal word of scriptures that we forget about listening to God in the moments of our daily living: “*Some of us are so heaven bound, that we're no earthly good...*”.... we treat the ills of this world with a first-aid kit when in fact it seems that major surgery is required.

Perhaps to love as Micah and Jesus and Paul would have us do, requires of us a political commitment ... influencing public policy makers to do the right thing...to create public policy that is humane at its very core...ethically consistent with an AGAPE kind of Love... LOBBYING FOR LOVE IN PUBLIC POLICY – I LIKE IT! The horrendous wounds in our world need treatment badly, they are inflicted by the political, the economic and social structures of our time...there are those who say “I do what I can do” and I try to feed the hungry, I give to so many causes and relief agencies...and I say “God bless “to you who do that...but my plea is that we not ignore the necessity of dealing with the root systemic causes of hunger, and poverty and war...they are social, they are economic and they are intensely political.... it is in the political arena that public policy is made, where public moneys are allocated and where those people whom Jesus favored most (the least of these....) depend...

In the year 2000, you might remember that as part of the United Nations, we said that we would reduce by one half, the poverty in the world by the year 2015 (7 years from right now)...yet the world bank tells us that there are close to 1. 2 billion chronically hungry people in our world (more than in 2000)... and even this week we have seen an enormous surge in the worldwide cost of food.... it seems poverty is not on the decline.... it is increasing...not only abroad but right here at home. You and I, maybe spend 10 to 20% (or less) of our budget on food...but in the poorer areas of the world, which in many cases is right here at home...the cost of feeding a family jumps to 60, and often 90% of a families income...and if you go to Haiti, not far from our own shores... most of the population spends their entire income on food...which may include “*mud biscuits*”...some nutrients mixed with mud...

The level of child hood poverty jumped by 73% from the year 2000 to the year 2006 right here in Colorado...almost twice as many Colorado Children are living in poverty as they were in 2000--- almost 200,000 kids are living in poverty in Colorado...no other state has had such an increase in childhood poverty...no other state is even close...we citizens of Colorado who are privileged to live in this amazing and beautiful state, seem not to care too much for our most vulnerable...our children.... shame on us!

How do you love a world into being less poverty stricken...into being less hungry...I submit to you it cannot be done by personal charity alone...you and I must become involved in the political process that

determines who leads, on what principles they stand and the laws they pass on behalf of all the children, all the time... I believe that Micah, and that political radical Jesus and that honored and martyred servant Paul had it right... you must love enough to care about your neighbor even in this micro-global world we live in, and we must never believe that politics doesn't matter... I do not know how I can walk humbly with my God, without participating in the politics of love.... I can't imagine it----can you?

There are many issues other than poverty, you know them as well or better than I do the recent sub-prime lending crisis here in the U. S. ; the threat of world-wide recession; the incredulous rise in fuel prices, the speculation of the food commodities market; the struggle to understand and ameliorate climate change; the natural weather catastrophes that have so devastated our own neighbors (in Windsor).... all these contribute to price surges.... which always, always.... find our poorest neighbors first...and now the poorest are growing exponentially....

Now there is a crucial distinction to be made between personal acts of love that aim to feed the poor and political actions that seek to remedy the root causes... **no doubt** feeding the poor is required of you and I... I dare say Judy O. and the youth of this church, and Pat and Derrick O'Neal, and Wiley Daniel and the Parkers... do an unglorified yet magnificent job of feeding our local poor on our behalf... just yesterday... thank you, thank you and thank you ... and so I say blessed be the hand that bakes the bread and blessed be the hand that offers it... and blessed be the hand that receive it;.... but also blessed is the hand that raises the issue of poverty and hunger at the table of the local politicians because they make the rules and decide where the public money is spent...

Our political system might not be the best in the world, but it sure beats whatever is in second place according to the wisdom of Winston Churchill... yet it still seems that the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer... Jesus says that the poor will always be with us... but must they be in such great numbers... I don't think so...

... personal acts of love might salve our consciences, and they are absolutely "salt-of-the-earth-necessary", but they leave the disease untreated. **A personal holiness that nurtures personal virtues such as love and sensitivity to the needs of others without addressing the societal causes of human suffering fosters a kind of counterfeit love.**

I believe, I strongly believe that loving our neighbors requires us to step into the political arena because that is where the policy decisions affecting the lives of so many people are made... Agape style Love must be fleshed out in public policy if we are to carry out Jesus' mandate to love our neighbor, to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God requires no less it seems to me.

When Jesus spoke in his hometown synagogue, he began by quoting the O. T. prophet Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord*" (Luke 4:18-19)....

In both the old and new testaments God is portrayed as the champion of orphans and widows, the maimed, the sick, the captives, the immigrants.... indeed scriptures are loaded with divine bias for all those who yearn for a place in the sun, those who have been crowded out and sometimes despised for their place in the shadows where the sunshine is hardly seen...

To view the world through the eyes of the Christ, as I believe we are called to do, we must acknowledge, understand and accept responsibility for our connectedness, each to the other as indeed we are the human family. This Agape loving is not just an abstract principle ,... it is as concrete as our neighbors need..... I take a little license here, but I'll risk it... "I was hungry and you cut food stamp funding and school lunch programs for the poor,... I was thirsty but the polluted rain kills the fish in the

lakes and the rivers become unfit to drink...I was a stranger without a home, and you wiped out the subsidies which were my one great hope for a decent place to live...I was naked and you cut the assistance appropriations; you cut the funding to community service agencies, the job training programs that gave so many a chance at self-sufficiency, the day-care centers which allowed me to work while my children received decent care; you slashed the funding dramatically...I was sick and you cut Medicaid funding and Medicare reimbursement so much that I was turned away, no provider would accept me. I was in prison and you cut funding for legal services so that "equal justice under the law" became a mockery... You took away the lawyer helping my family avoid eviction, you did all this you said so that you could save your economy and balance your budget...but the money you had been spending to help me --- you added to your spending for war, billions for war.... and you cut the taxes of the very rich so they would have even more while I would have even less....

"Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison and would not help you?" The Lord will reply: *"I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of the least important ones, you refused to help me..."*

We must get politically involved...not just to shout at or condemn a particular candidate, or a particular party...no doubt we will do this, I will, it's fun and easy to do...but the real political work that must be done is for you and I to provide thoughtful, humane and inclusive, adult grown-up rational influence to our legislators whether they are local, state or national... each and every public policy, each and every public budget is a moral document.... no exceptions.... no exceptions....

My plea is that we not give in to the prostitute of cowardice and greed, and fear...

I believe we are called, you I, we Christian pilgrims of the United Methodist persuasion...we are called into the world to heal wounds...to lift the despairing all around us...we do that not only by our personal commitments to prayer and devotion to principle but to helping inform the public policy debate.... in this the year of our Lord, 2008

I am convinced that to love, as the Christ would have us to love...in this 21st Century.... in part is to join the private lives of each of us to the public life of all of us...

But in so doing, in this 21st century moment, when this country is about to choose its next president... we ought not compromise our faith, our integrity and our humanity.... We ought not compromise the faithful walk of wisdom and humility, for if we do we shall stumble easily into immoral simplistic answers and immoral imperatives of cruelty and war.... I hear some say that to become politically involved is to join the devil at play...Not so.... to not care and not participate is throwing moral responsibility away...throwing the gift away.... I plead as we live in a world of incredibly complex and difficult challenges, of incredibly and inexplicably beautiful wonders...that we do not compromise our faith courage, letting it lapse into passivity...

That we do not compromise our faith courage into conformity, our faithful compassion into indifference, our Christian conscience into cynicism...our faith into trivial pursuits....

And what does the Lord require of me...*to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with God*.... I for the life of me, cannot imagine caring for my neighbor, global or next door, without participating in the public policy debate wherever it is to be found....

Love, the Politics Of Love... requires no less of us pilgrims if we are to stay on a relevant path in this needy world.... I trust in God to grant me the courage and the humility to keep participating ...and I trust for you the same...so many lives depend on it.... Amen.

Rev. Dean Woodward
Park Hill United Methodist Church

June 22, 2008