

**IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE,
BUT NOT OF IT**

**a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
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CALL TO WORSHIP

James Forbes is the recently retired Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York City, an interdenominational, international, interracial church of over 2000 members affiliated with both the American Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ. He is a longtime friend of the Unitarian Universalist movement. In 2001, he spoke at UU General Assembly, on the occasion of the installation of a person of color, for the very first time, as our president. Dr. Forbes praised our justice-making, our distinguished five-hundred-year tradition of dissent and protest. And he offered us the challenge of a simple-sounding question. Why do we do it?

It is Justice Sunday again, and again we acknowledge our gratitude to Dr. Forbes for lovingly prodding us with this question. Today, we carry his question a step further: once we have an understanding of why we engage in justice-making, we can ask, how then, in light of that understanding, should we go about this work? Come, let us live in the questions again today. Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

Last year on Justice Sunday, we began to explore a deeper understanding of the place of justice-making in our church's hierarchy of values. I suggested to you that justice is about truth-telling. For example, racial justice-making replaces the categorical falsehood of racism with the categorical truth that all people are entitled to be treated fairly on the basis of their common humanity, irrespective of color.

Justice-making achieves only a rough approximation of the whole truth about the victims and the perpetrators of injustice. The part of the truth that resides in individuality and difference, rather than commonality and sameness, is consciously left aside. If the whole truth could be told and accepted by all of humanity, justice-making would disappear. Telling the whole truth is the essence of love – to see and accept others as they are, and to be seen and accepted by them as we are. This heals spiritual wounds and moves us toward wholeness. And wholeness is still the best word I know for the value I would put at the top of our church's hierarchy of values. Justice-making is not the equal of this ultimate value, but rather, is its servant.

To say this about justice-making is not to dismiss it as unimportant. In fact, it is an essential focal point for spiritual growth, for those who commit or suffer from abuses of power, and for those who work for justice. The worth, dignity, and nobility of human beings are starkly revealed by injustices that violate these basic human attributes. A person who turns toward rather than away from such suffering by working for justice is taking a huge step toward opening

his own heart, increasing his capacity for compassion, and having a transcendent experience of the holy within him.

The further question I want to reflect on with you today is this: how should our hierarchy of values as a religious community shape the way we compose ourselves in the public square to do justice?

Others have provided some spectacular examples of how not to do this. Last spring, Jerry Falwell blessed Newt Gingrich's short-lived presidential candidacy. But not before Newt begged forgiveness for something the Religious Right considered to be a grievous sin. When Gingrich was Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1998, he led the charge to have President Clinton impeached. Nine years later, Gingrich contemplated running for president. He made a public confession that he had been having an extramarital affair while he was leading the impeachment charge, and asked Falwell to bless his candidacy. Falwell obliged, declaring Newt's confession to be genuine. He compared Gingrich to Ronald Reagan, saying: "I well remember the challenge we evangelicals faced in 1980 when our candidate, Ronald Reagan, was the first presidential candidate who had gone through a divorce. We wisely made allowance for God's forgiveness, and America was the beneficiary of this great champion."

The medieval Catholic word for what Falwell gave Gingrich is an "indulgence" – the formality of forgiveness, dispensed by a church in exchange for value given. The value given by Gingrich was a commitment to remain in alignment with the political positions enshrined in Falwell's religion. The essence of the Falwell/Gingrich bargain was "I'll forgive you for offending one part of our religion and smile on your candidacy if you'll promise to support the political positions of our religion going forward -- as a public officeholder." This kind of horse-trading happens all the time in politics; but Falwell and his followers claimed to be a church, not a political party.

This political approach to religion in the public square is not the special province of the Religious Right. A few years ago, Jim Wallis, editor of a liberal religious magazine called Sojourners, wrote a book about religion and politics called God's Politics. He begins with a battle cry for liberals to "take back our faith" from the Religious Right. It is a "fight fire with fire" manifesto. Wallis faults the Religious Right for claiming to know God's political views on every issue -- but ignoring what he calls "the subjects that God seems to care the most about."

We have to ask, of course, "seems to whom?" The answer is painfully obvious: to Jim Wallis, who claims to speak for God every bit as much as the Religious Right does. His vocabulary for this is the same as the one used by the Religious Right: proof texts from the Bible. They've got theirs, he's got his. It's hard for me to imagine a process less transformative, less religious, than these cannonades of Biblical citations.

Wallis offers no transcendent theology to guide the actions of a church in the public square. This is most evident in the political advertisement Wallis and his magazine, Sojourners, ran during the 2004 national election campaign, entitled "God is not a Republican. Or a Democrat." But the text of the ad makes it clear that Wallis does think God is a liberal, and we do know how liberals tend to vote. The ad goes through a familiar list of liberal positions,

adding supporting citations to Bible verses. Wallis' approach is all about changing issue outcomes. It's not about changing people, which is central to the mission of any transcendent religion.

Rabbi Michael Lerner is editor of the liberal religious magazine Tikkun and founder of a social justice organization called the Network of Spiritual Progressives. He too has a recent book, called The Left Hand of God, which lays out what he calls "The Spiritual Agenda for American Politics." Like Wallis, he treats religion as an instrument of politics.

Lerner describes the secular left as "consistently disarm[ing] itself of what could be its most powerful weapon: a spiritual vision of the world." He wants the Democratic Party to make a declaration that "Yes, we actually take the teachings of Moses, Jesus, Buddha, and other spiritual and religious traditions seriously, and we are going to implement them in the real world because we see ourselves as part of one united human family." He urges them to do this in order to "win majority support and hold it for many decades to come." By doing this, he predicts, the Left "will be able to build a movement and a political party that will be in a position to bring about all the good things liberals and progressives have fought for with such limited success over the past hundred years."

Now, I'm all for spiritual vision. But the best way to murder a spiritual vision is to practice it in order to win something. To embrace political success as one's ultimate value is to make a religion of politics. A religion that aspires to nothing more transformational than enacting the liberal political reform agenda of the past 100 years has set its sights woefully low. Moses, Jesus, and Buddha had something of a wholly different order in mind.

And to get really personal about it, I do too.

And so does the liberal Catholic theologian Garry Wills. Reacting to the Democratic Party's recent efforts not to be outJesused by the Republicans, Wills offered a stinging rebuke in the New York Times, entitled "Christ among the Partisans." "There is no such thing as a 'Christian politics,' he declared. "If it is a politics, it cannot be Christian." I think he's right.

Now, you're entitled to feel confused by this. If you were among the 80 congregants who attended our Maundy Thursday service ten days ago, you'll remember [pause] (at least I hope you'll remember) my description of Jesus as so incendiary that the Roman Empire had him killed. And didn't Jesus repeatedly take up the cause of the poor, the downtrodden, the despised? He did, and he was indeed incendiary. His inflammatory power, though, flowed not from any political prowess, but rather, from the opposite: his refusal to play politics, to wheel and deal, to settle for mere legislative reform. Far from being relieved when Jesus told Pontius Pilate, "my reign is not of this present order," the Romans were shocked and disturbed by this forswearing of political ambition in favor of something far more dark and demanding – a transformative conception of love and community that would render the politics-as-usual reign of Rome utterly irrelevant.

And likewise, today, the reign of Washington, D.C.

Jesus' advocacy for the poor presented his followers with just one question: would they treat the poor with the same love they showed for him, their precious teacher – not out of any sense of duty, or even morality; but rather, because their hearts had been swung open so widely by an experience of God within them that they could not possibly do otherwise? Would they do that? As Garry Wills points out, “no government can propose [this] as its program.” That is so because the love Jesus preached is radically anti-programmatic and would be reduced to lifelessness if someone tried to programmatize it. It is too expansive, too explosively transformative to be contained within the crude structures by which government must do the secular work of applying standards of fairness.

I'm using Jesus as the teachable example here because in America much of the writing and thinking about religion and politics is addressed to the situation of Christian religious groups. It's my belief, though, that the same truths would apply to any religion engaged in justice-making as a way of honoring and calling forth the unrealized capacity of everyone for transcendent spiritual experience, however named.

Social behavior that does not even satisfy secular standards of fairness, of course, will also fail to meet the dramatically higher standards of love, healing, and wholeness to which religion should call everyone. It makes sense for religious people, as citizens, to support efforts to improve society's fairness standards. Many of you do this, and it is a praiseworthy thing. But when religious people go into the public square as a church, it is to call on others to embrace their ultimate values of love, healing, and wholeness. The mission of the church is lost if these values are compromised politically for the sake of progress toward secular fairness.

A church can advocate for justice, but it does this by witnessing to the connection between the justice issue and its ultimate values, rather than by engaging in political compromise. This attitude toward justice-making by churches has sweeping implications for how they must do the work:

First, religious justice-making gives priority to changing the hearts of people over winning political battles – awakening everyone to love and compassion, including their worst enemies, and including themselves. There is nothing selfish about working to open your own heart. It is the most generous, life-saving gift you could possibly give the world. When Mike Dann and Sally Kellen and others of us are changed by justice work that requires them to look the spiritual catastrophe of Darfur square in the eye and struggle with it, that change is felt in the lives of those around them. This is how we change the world, sooner or later.

Second, justice-making confronts churches with choices about the “how” of the work versus the “what” of the work. We can use rhetorical language to flatter or terrify people, in order to manipulate them into voting the way we want them to vote. Secular justice work often succumbs to this temptation to focus singlemindedly on the what, on the so-called outcome. Or, we can tell the unvarnished truth about the injustice, with compassion for those who disagree with us. In relation to changing people, how we do the work is more important than what the outcome is.

We know how to do this. During the marriage amendment controversy, some of us spent many hours going door to door. I will never forget the newspaper picture of Jessica O'Brien

doing this. She was standing on some front porch somewhere. The lady of the house had opened the glass storm door and was leaning out of it. The two of them were talking. I don't know exactly what was said, of course, but knowing Jess I'm pretty sure I know the message: something like, "I'm deeply troubled by treating gay and lesbian people the way this law would treat them. It would be very hurtful to people I know and love. I'd like to talk with you for a minute or two about that." And so on. This is the truth-telling, healing talk that will change the world. Sooner or later. It is of a wholly different order from mere political discourse.

Third, because the justice-making of churches is more concerned with how than what, it sometimes will look "inefficient" from a conventional outcome-oriented perspective. It will divert energy from the "throughput" of the work, stopping to ask how those doing and opposing the work are being affected by it spiritually; to ask hard ethical questions about how the work should be done. It will do this because for a church, this IS the work. During the summer and fall, our Environmental Stewardship Group spent a long time educating themselves about environmentalism and about how to cultivate a spiritual perspective on this kind of justice work. They could have had a more immediate impact by moving directly into the doingness of an environmental project. But I believe their long-term impact will be of a wholly different order. I believe they will affect habits of the heart that they, and those they encounter in this work, bring into all aspects of their lives.

Fourth, churches have to resist the temptation to sponsor political proposals. In his book, God's Politics, Jim Wallis deplors what he calls "the politics of complaint." He declares that religious people "should always point and concretely connect to viable policy alternatives that could actually solve the issue at hand." (emphasis added) The issue at hand. This, he insists, in "in the tradition of the prophets." For him that has meant testifying before the Platform Committee of the Democratic Party and offering a six-point plan for averting war in Iraq. Michael Lerner is singing the same tune – acting as an adviser to Bill Clinton during his presidential campaign and offering his "Spiritual Agenda for American Politics" and his eight-point "Spiritual Covenant with America."

But Jesus never offered any six-point or eight-point plans. I'm pretty confident that none of the Judaic prophets did either. They had a profoundly different sense of what "the issue at hand" really was. They preached about something much less programmatic, much more radical, and much more transformative: the awakening of all people to love, healing, and wholeness. Churches cannot take responsibility for political proposals and be responsible to their own transformative missions at the same time.

Fifth, a justice-making church must take great care concerning political alliances. Its members wear two hats – one as secular citizens, the other as religious seekers. Political proposals are fine for citizens, whether they go to church or not. But when the religious community speaks with one voice, as a church, that voice must be a singular call to high spiritual aspirations. Injustice must be seen as a focal point for calling people to love, healing, and wholeness.

This is the complex, awkward role a church takes on when it resolves to go into the public square, while insisting on being true to its nature as a church. This is what it means to be

in the public square, but not of it. It is the difference between being just one more interest group competing with many others to gain leverage over the secular powers, and being a ministry to all of those other groups and even to the powers themselves. It means engaging with the secular world fully, but without buying into its rules of engagement – as I believe Jerry Falwell, Jim Wallis, and Michael Lerner have done.

This is a tremendous challenge in my life. I imagine it looks like a tremendous challenge to many of you too. Some of you may wonder whether you're ready for such a challenge. What I have said this morning may have led you to think that a person needs to be "spiritually evolved" or something before becoming involved in justice-making.

Please don't leave here today thinking that.

Please walk back with me to where we began this reflection on our church's hierarchy of values. Justice-making is a focal point of spiritual growth -- not only for those who commit or suffer from abuses of power, but also for those who work for justice. The worth, dignity, and nobility of human beings is starkly revealed by violations of these basic human attributes. A person who turns toward rather than away from such suffering by working for justice is taking a huge step toward opening his own heart, increasing his capacity for compassion, and having a transcendent experience of the holy within him.

There is no such thing as taking that step too soon. No one is prepared for it, and everyone is ready for it . It is never about your refining your expertise. It is always about opening your heart.

AMEN.