

For Heaven's Sake—Politics: Preaching on National Holidays

Robert G. Middleton, American Baptist Minister
Saco, Maine

National holidays pose a special challenge for preachers. The reason for the challenge can be easily stated. National holidays bring into close relationship two strong and volatile forces. One is religion. The other is politics. If you mix the two, as may well be done on a national holiday, the result is often explosive.

A perceptive insight into this challenge for preachers is provided in a cartoon by Whitney Darrow, Jr., in *The New Yorker*. The setting of the cartoon is the study of an established, older minister. He is clearly a minister who has done well; he is "successful" as our culture judges success. Beside the desk is a young minister, evidently just about to launch his career. "Drawing upon my not inconsiderable experience, Andrews," says the prosperous parson, "my advice to a young man ambitious of preferment in our profession is to steer clear of two subjects—politics and religion."

Yet confrontation with that realm where politics and religion inescapably touch each other is precisely what the national holidays offer. Our national holidays—Labor Day, Columbus Day, Thanksgiving Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July—confront preachers with an opportunity which is also a responsibility. The opportunity is to provide for the people of the congregation an approach to our national experience which they are likely to get nowhere else. For in the context of the church's faith the practices and policies of the nation are to be viewed in terms of God's purpose.

The difficulty of discerning God's will is to be admitted. In face of the difficulty, preachers can adopt one of two unfortunate responses. One is to let the difficulty of the task preclude any attempt to do it. A retreat into the more comfortable realm of private religion is carried out. The second response is to ignore the difficulty of the task and lay claim to an assurance which can rarely be genuine. The result is often unpleasant dogmatism or arrogant self-righteousness. If as preachers we are going to attempt on Sundays near our national holidays a realistic confrontation between the insights of Christian faith and the policies of the nation, we are obviously going to have to steer a careful course.

Care should be taken at the outset to make clear what we are talking about in terms of mixing politics and religion. This is not a call for partisan politics. To become a partisan would be to sacrifice what is, or should be, the church's most important quality—its radical independence, a refusal to be the hired voice of any particular segment of modern society. By politics I mean the way in which in a democratic society the issues of our common life are faced and some sort of tolerable compromise is achieved. It is quite clear to any careful observer of the process that the compromise finally reached is never a perfect solution; it may end up fully satisfying no group. But this imperfection can never justify the avoidance of the political realm. Politics is a crucially important activity in a democratic society, and it is one in which Christian believers, acting directly under the inspiration of faith, should be involved.

The different national holidays, then, present a chance for preachers to face up to the issue of politics and religion. While each of the national holidays does this, here I want to center on the Fourth of July.

The Rehabilitation of Politics

There is no escaping the fact that in America at the present time there is a deep disenchantment with politics. This is something overheard in casual conversations. "Politics is a dirty game." "There is no point in political activity; nothing is achieved." "All politicians are corrupt." Comments like the above are heard with dismayingly frequency and are said with frightening vehemence. And what you can overhear in casual conversation is made explicit in the opinion polls, which tabulate with wearisome insistence a pervasive cynicism about politics.

A careful distinction needs to be made. There is always a certain skepticism about politics and especially about politicians. This is not only understandable; it is probably valuable, since we know perfectly well that power is both utterly necessary and always dangerous. Those who wield it need to be watched. But what we are now seeing in America is not a healthy skepticism but, rather, a corrosive cynicism. That is the danger we confront. The pulpit can face up to this condition and help the community of faith to achieve an approach to politics which maintains the idealism without illusions of perfection, and realism without the dangerous effects of cynicism.

An essential starting point is an open-eyed assessment of the current attitude. E.J. Dionne, Jr., has put it clearly: "Over the last three decades, the faith of the American people in their democratic institutions has declined, and Americans have begun to doubt their ability to improve the world through politics. . . . For most of us, politics is increasingly abstract, a spectator sport barely worth watching."¹ The steady decline in participation in voting simply underscores the accuracy of Dionne's assertion.

In view of this situation, I want to suggest that preachers can render a significant service by showing how politics is an inescapable part of human experience. Both as Christian believers and as American citizens, we have been shaped and molded by politics.

It is difficult to understand how people can read the Bible and miss the political dimension. It is about politics from start to finish. The Exodus delivered people from slavery and oppression, and it was a political act. The prophets constantly held the society of the day up against the plumb line of righteousness and denounced its manifest evils. The needy were sold for a pair of shoes and justice was corrupted in the gate. An ominous gap existed between the rich and poor, with the rich lying on beds of ivory, and the poor denied life's basic necessities. The crucifixion was a political event, carried out by edict of Roman law. And all through the Bible there is a persistent concern to defend the rights of the poor and powerless.

Yet we face the fact that many people in the Christian community who take the Bible with great seriousness denounce what they call the church's mixing in the political realm. Such folk need to hear the call of the great rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Albert C. Outler reports that he attended one of those ecumenical gatherings concerned about the future of theology. His tablemate was the rabbi. Most of the time Rabbi Heschel was quiet but toward the end he said wistfully: "It has seemed puzzling to me how greatly attached to the Bible you seem to be and yet how much like pagans you handle it. The great challenge to those of us who wish to take the Bible seriously is to let it teach us its own essential categories; and then for us to think *with* them, instead of *about* them."² To think with the Bible is to think politically.

The important role played by politics in our faith is matched by its role in shaping the American experience. The document we celebrate on the Fourth of July can hardly be understood in anything but political terms.

Out of considerations which were clearly political, a yearning for independence had been building up in the American colonies. The follies of George III, the failure of any peace proposals, the impact of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*—all of these factors contributed to the determination of the colonists to be independent. In May and June of 1776, the debate in the Continental Congress went on, and on June 11 a committee was appointed to "prepare a declaration" of independence. Thomas Jefferson was a member of the committee and was asked to prepare the document, John Adams remarking that "you can write ten times better than I can." In some two weeks the writing was done. It was carefully considered by the delegates and some changes were made; the Congress removed some of Jefferson's denunciations of slavery and moderated his attack on George III. The debate was on July 2, continued on July 3, and on much of July 4. Probably it was not until August 2 that the document was finally engrossed and signed.

What is important to note is that this is a political document. It moves from the assertion of basic political principles—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"—to a listing of political acts of oppression by the king—"a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States." And then follows a list of specific political offenses. It was, in short, a political act which formed us as a people.

Despite the clear political implications of much of the material in the Bible and the political framework of the Declaration of Independence, Christians in America continue to look with suspicion upon involvement in politics. This strange phenomenon has without doubt many causes. Here we consider briefly two factors which I believe continue to hamper the social witness of Christians.

The demand for causes that are ethically above suspicion and which permit choices that can be embraced without reservation is one factor inhibiting effective political participation. The moralism which is part of the American religious tradition produces an outlook in which all too many Christians reject political participation on the basis of lofty moral and ethical principles. Their cry is often heard: "Politics is an enterprise in which you inevitably get your hands dirty. You aren't afforded any perfect choices. In order to keep your Christian integrity, you must avoid politics." Such sentiments, or sentiments very much like those, are often heard in church circles.

The position has truth in it. It reads the political scene with commendable accuracy. What is unfortunate is the decision made as a result. This position treats the political sphere as something unique, imagining that some of the compromises necessary in the political realm are never encountered elsewhere. A more perceptive reading of the human situation, however, would surely make plain that imperfect moral choices meet the Christian believer at every point. What is needed is the willingness to act, even if one's hands get dirty in the process, and to offer such action to God, trusting in his mercy.

The very nature of politics is that it involves a person in an area where perfection of choice is not possible. As T.V. Smith once said, politics is the art of compromising an issue without compromising yourself. In the final analysis, politics is not the way to the best result conceivable; it is the way to the best result achievable. And the Christian is to be part of that venture in responsible obedience.

If insistence on morally perfect choices is one significant weakness in our Christian response to social involvement, the strong desire for a complete victory, a

total solution, is another. For much of our history, we have been a people who believed that solutions could be found to all our problems, individual and social. The idea that the best we could hope for in terms of social action would be modest advances was something we did not want to face. Utopianism, unchecked by Christian realism, often marked American religious thought and practice.

The hard truth is that there are no final solutions in social affairs. What is called for is an outlook which will enable persons to do something even if they cannot do everything. Using Immanuel Kant's observation, "Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made nothing entirely straight can be built," Sir Isaiah Berlin writes: "So I conclude that the very notion of a final solution is not only impracticable but, if I am right, and some values cannot but clash, incoherent also. The possibility of a final solution . . . turns out to be an illusion; and a very dangerous one."³

A vital Christian faith can be of immense help in enabling persons to live with partial solutions. It is, once again, what it means to live as a responsible Christian. It is said that Lincoln was once asked why he was so sad and wise. He responded, "because I know I can't get everything I want."⁴ In politics that's a source of effectiveness.

The Unfinished Revolution

The Declaration of Independence enunciated a noble goal for the new nation—to assure all persons of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Along with the Constitution, the ideals of the Declaration go to make up what Gunnar Myrdal in his great work *An American Dilemma* called the American Creed. Involved in that Creed are the values of justice, equality, dignity, liberty, individual rights, and the limitation of powers. This Creed, which reflects in clear fashion many of the ethical ideals of the Christian tradition, has been an important part of the American political scene from the inception of the nation and it remains important to this day. What the American Creed and the Christian interpretation of human existence have in common is a quality which we sometimes find disturbing. Both the political Creed and the Christian imperative make clear that a dismaying and dangerous gap exists between what we profess and what we practice. The promise of American life for many of our citizens remains unfulfilled. The Revolution is unfinished.

Christians need to understand the nature of the situation we confront. In terms of shedding light on our recent experience, I believe there is no book more helpful than Samuel P. Huntington's *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. His basic contention is that the American Creed, which he believes is subscribed to by the vast majority of Americans, creates an awareness of the gap between the ideal and the institution; he calls it the IVI gap. It is always present but the clarity and intensity of awareness varies. Sometimes there is a vivid awareness of this gap; sometimes it is barely noticed. When it is noticed, it engenders a time of what Huntington calls creedal passion. "The political climate of creedal passion periods is distinguished by widespread and intense moral indignation. Political passions are high, existing structures of authority are called into question, democratic and egalitarian impulses are renewed, and political change—anticipated and unanticipated—occurs."⁵ There have been four such periods of creedal passion, he declares: the Revolutionary era, the Jacksonian years, the Progressive era, and the 1960s and 1970s with their protest and reform movements and the epochal civil rights struggle.

It is important to note carefully what Huntington sets forth. Periods of creedal

passion are those times when the American Creed takes on vital life. This is seen clearly in the civil rights struggle. Beginning in the Black churches, a movement was generated in which a great host of white persons became authentically involved. An intolerable contradiction was perceived to be at the heart of not only the American experience but of the human situation. It had to be changed, and militant pressure was necessary to achieve the result desired. So we had a situation in which there was a great deal of social turbulence, and many in the church, viewing this with alarm, felt that the society was coming apart. But what was actually taking place was that the society was affirming the very qualities which formed its true nature. "In the 1960s," Huntington writes, "the American consensus did not come apart; it came alive."⁶

The turbulence I mentioned was a reality both within persons and in society. Within persons it created a deep sense of guilt and penitence. "Americans," Huntington says, "cannot be themselves unless they believe in their Creed, and if they believe in their Creed they must be against themselves."⁷ Both the American Creed and the Christian tradition created this very real cleavage in the American soul. The civil rights struggle was an attempt to close the gap between our ideals and our practice. If it was not wholly successful—I've already contended that no perfect and final solution is ever possible—it was a noble effort.

It is this splendid quality which makes it so unfortunate that many now disparage and repudiate the effort. Reflected in this is a tension within Christian believers about the real purpose and nature of the church. Is the church primarily a therapeutic or a prophetic community? This is the question and it is always difficult. Pressure is often exerted toward restricting the church to a role as a therapeutic community. And this is surely part of the church's task and should never be forgotten. But what is dangerous is that it is so easy to get approval for the therapeutic work of the church and so difficult to get approval for its prophetic tasks. James Gustafson laments the "contemporary tendency of the church to be viewed primarily as a therapeutic community. By this I mean simply that if the language of salvation, self-fulfillment, relief from guilt and anxiety, in short the language of what religion can do for you . . . dominates, the purpose of the church is askew . . . The language of command and obedience, of responsibility, of good and evil, of right and wrong, better and worse, are part of the language of morals."⁸ And this is precisely the kind of language the pulpit needs to speak in this day. There are certainly few other places in our society where such an approach is to be experienced.

Nothing said here is intended to suggest that this type of preaching on national holidays is easy to do; it is neither easy to do nor always pleasant to hear. But such preaching has the great merit of responsible confrontation of the issues which decisively shape human existence, and in the final analysis that is what marks authentic preaching.

NOTES

¹ E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 10.

² Albert C. Outler, *Theology Today*, (October, 1985): 290.

³ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 15.

⁴ Quoted in Bernard Crick, *In Defense of Politics* (Penguin Books, 1984), 137.

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸ James M. Gustafson, *The Church as Moral Decision-Maker* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 89.