

sermon-7/12/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“When Religion and Politics Mix”
2 Sam. 6:1-21

When I graduated from seminary my first call was to a church in southern Oregon. Sandy and I attended worship at First Presbyterian Church in Medford the Sunday before I was to start. This was the last Sunday for the student intern who had worked there filling the interim associate pastor slot.

Wendy was the preacher that day. She was preaching a fine sermon. Towards the end of it she looked at the congregation and said, “I just don’t know how to end this sermon with the right words. So, instead of trying, I am going to dance the conclusion of the sermon. She then proceeded to disrobe, so to speak. She kicked off her shoes and unzipped her pulpit gown. Underneath she was wearing a leotard. She then danced. It was beautiful.

Unfortunately it had an unintentional erotic undertone, at least for some of the men in the congregation. Actually it was troublesome for more than just the men. Some of the women were a bit offended by how tight the leotard fitted Wendy. All of this made my first Sunday in Medford a piece of cake! There was no way I was going to take off my pulpit robe and dance to end any of my sermons!

I thought of this story as I read our scripture passage for today in 2 Samuel. David’s dancing before the ark of the covenant was even more controversial than Wendy’s dance in her leotard. David was wearing a linen ephod. I looked that up, and, as it turns out, the ephod was an apron-like garment with no back side. It was kind of like a hospital gown, only it was used for sacred purposes.

So, here is David dancing with all his might, or, as the New English Bible puts it, “leaping and capering before the Lord” wearing only this linen ephod. As you might imagine, his wife was not all that pleased.

Michal looks out from her second story window in the royal palace and thinks, “For crying out loud. Who does he think he is exposing his backside like that before all those women, like an empty-headed fool!” Who can blame her?

There is obviously more going on in this text than just this primitive passage about David dancing immodestly. This chapter in 2 Samuel touches on God’s holiness; exuberance in worship; how joyful worship can lead to a sacramental generosity and finally the complicated relationship between religion and politics.

We can’t do justice to all of those topics in one sermon. So, we will look at only a couple of them. God’s holiness is a good place to start. Many who read this passage are troubled by the death of poor Uzzah. He was the one who was traveling with the ark when it started to wobble on the cart. Afraid it was going to fall off, he reaches out and steadies it with his hand. The next thing we know, he is lying dead beside the ark.

He was only trying to help. Why would God kill him for that innocent gesture? First, we need to understand that the Old Testament authors took the holiness of God very seriously. They talked about this holiness in terms of the fear of God, of God's incredible otherness. One can only stand in awe in the presence of such a God.

It goes further than that. One does not casually relate to God, to all that is most sacred, like we would to another human being or more mundane realities. God is not a best buddy, a pal we use when we need a little heavenly assistance. We are not the ones in control in any divine/human encounter.

While this story of God's anger zapping Uzzah seems to show a God with very little grace or compassion, it can be a helpful passage if we don't take it so literally. It is helpful if we see it in the context of its time, as a primitive way to get at this notion God's absolute holiness. Certainly David was affected by Uzzah's death. He decides maybe it might be a good idea for someone else to house the ark. Isn't that just like a king? Let someone else do the dangerous work.

At any rate, a deep respect for God's otherness, God's holiness, is critical when it comes to mixing religion and politics. Some may want to stop me and say, "Why do we want or need to mix religion and politics? Isn't that something one should never do in polite company?"

Listen to this quote from a leading Methodist pastor in Britain, Donald Soper. "I can't see any future for a church that in God's world doesn't accept that it must be involved in that part of it which is political and economic. A church which claims that the world is for Christ must be up to its neck in politics." That quote stopped me in my tracks. What does he mean?

Certainly religion needs to play a part in politics. The real question is how? If we turn to David for an example, we find that he did it well and he did it poorly. He brilliantly chose Jerusalem as his capitol city. Jerusalem was nothing before David captured it. It was situated very near the border of the old southern and northern kingdoms of Israel uniting them both into one kingdom. In addition, it was on a hill, which made it easy to defend.

Then David decided to bring the ark into Jerusalem. As scholars tell us, the ark was the preeminent sign of God's sovereignty and presence for Jews. It had enormous symbolic power.

By bringing the ark to Jerusalem David was uniting the center of his political power with the central symbol in their religion. It was a strategic and brilliant move. Jerusalem became the center of enormous power and importance in that day. It remains to this day a place where politics and religion mix, sometimes in uneasy ways.

One commentator writes, this text is an "invitation to contemplate the thin line that separates public honoring of true power in God and the cynical manipulation of religious

symbols to enhance political power.” That is not an easy subject. It is one where disagreements among people of good conscience are sure to be exposed.

The same commentator says that in order to have moral accountability in public life we need to risk religious engagement in the arenas of public power. I could not agree more. But, the question still remains. How should we do this?

We’ve seen terrible examples of the mixing of religion and politics in our time. I could easily mention examples of the religious right, with its narrow agendas, capturing part of the Republican party. Others could just as easily mention the political left using religion to support their causes, sometimes in rather cynical ways.

It is easy to point to the excesses and the problems. But, the fact remains, religion has to mix it up with politics, and economics for that matter. It has to because religion has an important voice in the discussions over health care reform, over how to respond to obscene corporate bonuses, over treatment of prisoners and torture, and in the discussion over nuclear disarmament.

Religion is at its best, however, when it stands outside partisan politics. The role of religion, and the Church, in the political arena is to talk about issues of justice, compassion, and how to settle disputes. It does this well when it critiques both sides of any discussion.

Don’t get me wrong. Religion is not neutral in these discussions. Any who take their faith seriously are passionate about issues that surface in politics and economics. But, religion loses its power when it is seen as partisan.

This is where talk about the holiness of God fits into this discussion. When the holiness of God is respected, those who speak from a religious standpoint do not manipulate public sentiment by using religion cynically for one side’s political advantage. When we fail to see this, we end up domesticating a holy God. We do this at our own peril.

David’s story is a great cautionary tale. He seems to be respecting God as he mixes religion and politics in chapter six of Second Samuel. He dances exuberantly seeing God as his main audience, not those looking on from the crowd. But, as one scholar notes, “The moment of David’s triumph is soon to be sullied by his lust and greed.” It is only in a few chapters that we read about his affair with Bathsheba.

It is not easy being a good citizen and a good Christian, especially when we mix the two as we almost have to do. When you add power to the mix, it gets even more complicated. May we not let that difficulty be an excuse to give up on the critical need for religion to have a voice in public policy and to critique all who act in the political realm. Amen