

Title: Misguided Politics
Text: I Samuel 8: 4 – 12
Date: June 10, 2018

I am self-conscious of having been away from the pulpit for a couple of weeks. Just so you are aware, I was in D.C. the week of May 21–25 taking advantage of a benefit you afford me called “Study Leave.” I thank you for this! I was attending an annual conference of the Festival of Homiletics, where an array of well-known preachers and scholars are presenting throughout the week. The theme this year was “Preaching and Politics,” which struck me as particularly timely. It is unavoidable that the various perspectives expressed that week have informed my thinking today.

I am also self-conscious that the mingling of preaching and politics makes many people uncomfortable. Many people think that it is totally inappropriate to proclaim anything from the pulpit that smacks of politics. What do you think?

While I don’t want to get into the weeds of telling you who to vote for, or how you must vote on a particular issue, I *do* think it is most appropriate to have high level discussions that may impact how you think in this arena. I don’t care much whether you are Republican or Democrat, but I *do* care that you have an appreciation for a faith that relates to *all* of life.

I believe it is misguided to perceive an artificial divide between the sacred and the profane. And I would add that I *also* believe the church should be a safe place to express differences without fear of judgement or reprisal. This should be paramount in our School of Love!

I recently heard someone say – I can’t tell you who – that *all* preaching is invariably political. When the preacher avoids talking about certain sensitive topics, there is a sense in which a political statement is being made by implicitly supporting the status quo. Think about that!

Another reason why this has become problematic for some is that Christianity has somehow morphed into a private love affair between Jesus and the individual. We have lost or discounted the possibility of God working through a people of faith collectively.

This was almost the exact opposite in what we refer to as Old Testament. There the emphasis seemed to be on *the community* of faith, with the personal dimension of faith being secondary. Of course, this emphasis by no means assured that all was well. This emphasis can go off the rails as well. That is why so many of the Old Testament prophets were being *self-critical* as they looked *within* the community of faith.

We read about such misguided efforts in our text today. Even though Samuel was a respected prophet, his sons were hardly following in his footsteps. We read that **“the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, ‘You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.’ But this displeased Samuel . . .”** (I Samuel 8: 4-6)

You know there is some shallow thinking going on when the prime motivator was to be **“like other nations.”** Yet I am sure that Samuel’s displeasure over this was rooted in some even deeper thinking. I suspect that he was conscious of a troubling pattern.

He was most certainly mindful that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 430 years before God used Moses to set them free.

They then crossed The Red Sea, went into the desert, and there Moses came down from Mt. Sinai to give the people The Ten Commandments. And the first commandment reads . . . **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”** (Exodus 20:3)

Then just a few chapters later we read, **“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us . . . He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”** (Exodus 32: 1 – 4)

So what is the pattern? The people are enslaved; God sets them free, and gives them guidance on staying free. The people take their freedom for granted, want to be like others, and essentially start worshiping false gods.

How depressing for Samuel to see this going on! Samuel voiced his exasperation to God, and God responded by saying: **“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.”** (I Samuel 8:7) Looking at this theologically, then, they have committed the sin of idolatry. Their quest for a king tells us an awful lot about the psyche of the Israelites at that time.

So be careful what you wish for, because God just may allow you to go with the flow, and see for yourself where it leads. Though it didn't make any difference, Samuel was explicit in his warnings to the people. He said, **“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots . . .”** (I Samuel 8: 11) It really goes on in a lot more detail, but that gives you the idea of where this will lead.

Now we'll have time to talk about King Saul next week, but for now I think the lesson is that this whole political initiative reveals much more about the distorted values of the people. Be careful what you wish for, because you just may end up with a distorted projection of your own insecurities!

I don't know if any of you are thinking ahead, but I believe this has more than a little bit of relevance to our political world today. As contemporary Americans we can learn from our spiritual ancestors, and discover just how easy it is to end up voting for a distorted projection of our own insecurities. So you really want a King? Someone will always be ready to accept that assignment! Dare we take the time to be self-critical, and think theologically and psychologically?

In his own time, Carl Jung spent a great deal of time thinking about the political figures of his day: Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. Beyond looking at individual personality types, Jung would say that Hitler is **“the mirror of every German's unconscious.”**

Dr. Murray Stein is a retired Jungian analyst, as well as a retired Presbyterian minister. Thinking of our current context he writes, **“To diagnose Trump is also to diagnose the collective society . . . From the outside, many people have diagnosed America as crazy and dangerous already in the past and not only now. The “ugly American” is a familiar figure around the world, and not only ugly but a bully and extremely dangerous because of America's oversized military. We are seeing the shadow of America in an especially dramatic way in the image of Trump.”**¹

So then we as a sub-culture that wants to live politically in the way and spirit of Jesus, must not only think theologically – calling out idolatry for what it is; but we must also think prophetically, with the self-critical inward gaze of the prophet . . . or of Carl Jung.

And aside from being just thinkers, we can also be actors. I once heard some politicians described as those who put their wet finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing. If that is the case, it just may well be up to us to create some new wind. Collectively we can be the ones to change the wind, and despite their individual motivations, many politicians will be quick to pick up on the new direction the wind is blowing.

And one final word to those who question whether it is appropriate to be involved politically. Marcus Borg warns us that, **“To abandon politics means letting the Pharaohs and monarchs and Caesars and domination systems, ancient and modern, put the world together as they will.”** That is a scary thought!

Unfortunately my timing for this message was off by just one week. Otherwise I would have numerous quotes from the June 18 issue of TIME magazine. The focus for this upcoming issue is entitled “King Me,” and there is an interesting sounding feature article entitled **“Visions of Absolute Power,”** written by Molly Ball and Tessa Berenson. If you are going for “extra credit,” you might want to read this issue next week and – rather than pointing an accusing finger – ask yourselves the following questions:

- 1) In what ways are we as a country getting what we asked for (just as Israel got what *they* asked for)?
- 2) What theological truths have we forgotten (just like the Israelites forgot where they came from)?
- 3) How can we unite with others to cause the wind to blow in a new direction?

Amen.

¹<http://chironpublications.com/keep-calm-carry-interview-murray-stein-donald-trump/>

I Samuel 8: 4 – 12

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” ⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king.

¹¹He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

