

**UNEXPECTED JOY**  
Randall Tremba  
Second Sunday after Epiphany  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

\* \* \*

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent. (Isaiah 62:1-5)*

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The mother of Jesus was there. When the wine ran out, she said to him, "There's no more wine." (John 2:1-11)*

And as you know, Jesus took care of that in spectacular fashion. He turned vats of water into wine. He took a grim situation and transformed it into unexpected joy—the way the Beloved time and time again transforms the grief, despair and emptiness in our lives into great joy.

Speaking of joy, I got some unexpected joy in my life. Recently, someone angrily accused me of promulgating my political opinions by promoting a welcoming disposition toward Muslim refugees and thus violating the “separation of church and state.” By implication the governing council of this church, the Session, was accused of the same for its support of Muslim refugees.

The accusation itself didn't prompt joy. At first it prompted angst and self-doubt and forced me to examine my motives and my rights as a minister and our rights as a church.

What brought joy was my rediscovery of the historic practice of political preaching and advocacy in the Presbyterian tradition. It's a noble and prophetic practice and that fills me with pride and great joy.

As it turns out, the so-called “wall of separation,” propounded by Thomas Jefferson and incorporated in the Constitution's first amendment, was meant to keep the government from establishing any one denomination as a state sanctioned church and from meddling in church affairs. It was not meant to keep the church or other religious communities from trying to influence government policies and practices. Quite the contrary.

By the way, it's critical to distinguish between *common* politics—meaning *the common good* of the “polis” or community—and *partisan* politics—for *the good of a single party*.

The Presbyterian Church actually has a lobbying presence in Washington to represent our General Assembly's political, economic and social positions on such matters as abortion rights, food stamps, military armaments, racial injustice, and climate change. We have a proud record of addressing political, social, and economic issues as far back as the American Revolution. Presbyterian ministers were leaders in the rebellion against King George in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and in the abolitionist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the nuclear disarmament movement in the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Presbyterians are political in the common sense. It's in our DNA as far back as John Calvin.

But there is one, big glaring exception.

Just prior to the Civil War, the Presbyterian Church in the South forbade its ministers from preaching about slavery or anything considered *political*. That policy was called the “spirituality of the church,” and restricted ministers to preach only on “spiritual matters,” such as prayer, personal morality, and the literal meaning of the Bible, as long as it wasn't applied to political issues. That deviant position was repudiated by northern Presbyterian churches and has since been repudiated in southern churches although

many ministers and churches still abide by it.

Fourteen years ago, two new members of this church, who were liberal democrats from a Presbyterian church in Mississippi, complained bitterly over a sermon in which I addressed America's rush to war in Iraq. They complained even though they agreed with my opinion. They angrily told me that in all their years in the Presbyterian Church in Mississippi they NEVER once heard a "political issue" mentioned in the pulpit.

I was shocked. That was not my understanding of the role of the pulpit or preacher in our tradition and I told them so. And just like that, they left this church to find a *non-political* church.

In case you didn't know, I am obligated by my ordination vows and the historical role of the Presbyterian minister to address political, social, and economic issues. To not do so would diminish my ordination and betray my responsibility. By the way, a certain Baptist preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr. stood in the same prophetic tradition.

So, yes, I have a right and duty as the Teacher Elder of this church to preach *my* political views. BUT I am not—by IRS rules and by my own conscience—permitted to endorse *partisan* candidates or platforms.

If my views are seen as similar or identical to those held by the Democratic, Republican, or Libertarian parties, that's not my problem. I must preach my theologically informed and biblically grounded views regardless. Of course, congregations have dismissed ministers who just can't take their *theologically informed and biblically grounded* views anymore!

So what about allowing an opposing or alternate view from the pulpit as some have suggested? Once I advocate racial integration, then someone would speak against it. Or, when I advocate equality for gays and lesbians, then someone would speak against it. Or when I advocate welcoming of Muslims, then someone would speak against it.

That's not the role of the pulpit. The Presbyterian pulpit is not a debating platform.

Still, I firmly and strongly believe that diverse opinions should be welcomed and respected in the church, but aired in settings other than a Sunday morning service. And that's why we have a practice of holding forums in the Fellowship Hall around controversial issues from time to time. I've sat in on all of those, have listened carefully, and have had my own opinions altered.

As to the "freedom of the Presbyterian pulpit," that's not my opinion. That's historic fact and tradition. I'm not free to change it; nor do I want to. Nor should the government try—lest the ghosts of 18<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian ministers rise up to haunt it!!

And that brings us back to the Old Testament lesson for today.

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn. As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall I rejoice over you.*

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent.*

Zion is a nickname for Jerusalem. Jerusalem is also called "The City of God" and symbolizes the diverse cities and nations of all peoples. At the time, Zion was broken, depleted of hope, exhausted. It had lost its way, not unlike our own nation. But Zion would not be forsaken. Its common good would flourish again the way America can once again flourish in righteousness and compassion. It all depends on the political choices we make.

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silence. No more shall you be called Forsaken, and your land called Desolate for you shall be called My Delight.*

And speaking of forsaken and broken, once upon a time Jesus learned that a certain wedding party was broken. It had run out of wine, the way our own lives sometimes lose zest and joy. The celebration fell flat, desolate. But Jesus transformed vats of water into wine. And just like that unexpected joy abounded. According to the gospel, that was the first of his signs and his disciples then and there resolved to follow him wherever that might lead.

Which is to say, the way of Jesus is first and foremost about joy. Yes, to practice compassion in the way of Jesus is sometimes hard and even heart breaking. It's not easy building bridges or building up the City of God. Yes, we may get knocked about and knocked down. But still, the overwhelming experience of those who practice compassion and justice is abundant joy, joy gushing like a fountain.

May all of us know the joy of serving our Beloved Lord.