



## THE WELFARE OF THE CITY

October 9, 2016, The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19

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Theme: Religion and politics do mix – carefully.

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*O God, may these ancient words of the prophet Jeremiah arc across the ages to trouble and comfort us – to trouble those too at ease in the world, to comfort those too troubled by the cares of the world. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

To my mind, the high point in the generally embarrassing Presidential and Vice Presidential debates held to date came at the end of the Vice Presidential debate last Tuesday evening. The moderator, Elaine Quijano, asked the candidates about their stands on abortion. Both of these men, Tim Kaine and Mike Pence, are deeply committed Christians. Both come from church traditions that believe abortion is almost always wrong. Kaine is a practicing Roman Catholic, Pence a committed Protestant evangelical. Both personally oppose abortion. Kaine said that he nevertheless defends a woman's right to choose. Pence, who has longed worked to ban most abortions, said – in an indirect way – that that's still his position.

This is not a sermon about abortion. I relate this incident because with that question and those answers, this election's discourse rose to a higher, more intelligent and nobler level than had been reached before, either in the previous hour-and-a-half that night or in the sorry Presidential debate a week earlier. This happened, oddly enough, because Elian Quijano's question and the candidates' answers mixed religion and politics – *in a good way*.



The passage from the book of Jeremiah that Gracie just read invites that very question, the venerable and fraught question of religion and politics. The passage also offers insight into the answer. I'll come back to Jeremiah later.

The old saw that “religion and politics don't mix,” tidy as it sounds, is too simple by half. Think about it... If my faith means anything at all, that faith helps form my values and priorities. When I make a campaign contribution, when I talk about politics at a dinner party, when I cast my vote, my values and priorities – shaped by my faith as they are – *ought* to shape my check-writing, my dinner party words, and my vote. So, of course, religion and politics mix – but here's the caveat: they mix *very* carefully.

I'd like to frame a response to the faith-and-politics question by first sketching three ways to mix faith and politics that *don't* work. These three models that don't work, and the fourth one that *does* work, share a common assumption. Their shared assumption is that our Christian faith holds certain values and convictions that are not held by everybody else in the country. Jesus taught us certain things; people who don't follow Jesus don't necessarily share these values and beliefs. So the question is this: if you're a Christian and live in a world where many people aren't, how do you rightly mix religious commitments and civil commitments?

I'll call the first model that doesn't work, at least for most Christians, “the drop-out-of-the-world” model. Over the ages any number of Christians have concluded that the values of the world and the values of their faith are so totally at odds that the best they can do is just drop out. This is the model chosen by Protestant sectarians like the Amish and cloistered Roman Catholic monks and nuns. For some people at certain times, this may be a legitimate gambit, but you and I and Brick Church are simply *not* going to check out of the larger world... nor should we.

The second model that I don't think works I'll call the “take-over-the-world” strategy. This model also observes that the values of the faith are not the same as the values of the world, but instead of withdrawing, these folks imagine that it might be possible and beneficial to somehow actually conquer the world by



politics or by proselytizing, or both. There are a lot of secularists, mostly liberal secularists, who are apoplectic about what they imagine to be a right-wing Christian conspiracy to do just that. But in truth, “take over the country” Christians are a minority on the Christian right.

The last model for relating faith to the world that doesn’t work is what you might call the “blend-in-with-the-world” model. *This is the one that’s most tempting for the likes of you and me and a place like Brick Church.* We hopefully recognize that the values and convictions of our faith are not the same as those of the world around us, but in this model we imagine that if we just fly low, if we’re politely discrete about our convictions, or if we just keep quiet, we can sort of blend in – become Christian chameleons, altering our colors to be nearly invisible against the secular background. It won’t work. If we’re forever blending in, we *will* eventually forget who we are.

I sometimes pray when I eat out in New York restaurants. And I don’t mean silently with eyes open. I’m talking close-your-eyes, quietly out-loud praying before the meal. Oddly enough, I feel guilty about it. My fear is that I’m doing it, partly anyway, for the wrong reason. You see, I *enjoy* the startled looks from waiters and sideways glances from the next table. My fear is that I’m doing it as a poke in the New York eye. “Take this, *secular, sophisticated* Manhattan!”

*But...* when I do it, I’m reminded that I never really *can* blend in. And if we try to, my fear is that in keeping too quiet about our faith, in being too discrete about our values, we’ll end up blending in to the point of believing in anything and standing for nothing.

A fourth way, *a way that can work*, is suggested by that passage we read heard from the Old Testament. As Gracie noted, Jeremiah wrote several short letters to fellow Jews who’d been forced into exile in the heathen city of Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. In Babylon they were a tiny religious minority, a handful of the faithful in a sea of power, poverty, opulence and rank paganism – a little like New York. What to do?



Jeremiah doesn't tell them to withdraw from the world of Babylon and retreat into a ghetto.

Jeremiah doesn't tell them to take over Babylon, as if they could.

Jeremiah doesn't tell them to camouflage their unique religious identity and blend in. If they'd done that they'd have soon forgotten who they were.

Rather, old Jeremiah offers the fourth strategy. He tells them *“to build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce, take wives and have sons and daughters”* and finally (and this is of key importance) Jeremiah tells them to *“seek the welfare of the city,” (the welfare of heathen Babylon, mind you!)*... “And then Jeremiah adds, *“Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

In other words, don't withdraw from Babylon; don't try to take Babylon over, and don't blend into Babylon. Rather work and pray for the good of Babylon – the big old world you live in. Jeremiah's advice implies that religion and politics mix in a healthy way when religious people campaign, contribute, talk, argue, and finally vote, in a way that works for the welfare of the whole city.

Some years ago, I attended a talk by a Roman Catholic missionary to Korea about the difficulties South Korean Christians faced during the dictatorships of the '70s and '80s. He said that Korean Christians found themselves walking a tightrope between loyalty to God and loyalty to the state. This Roman Catholic then went on to say that in Korea it was the Presbyterians (“of all people” he added) who realized how delicate was the balance between loyalty to nation and loyalty to God. He said that he had always pictured Presbyterians as staid and unquestioning defenders of authority. He lamented that until he got mixed up with Presbyterians he had never been in trouble a day in his life. The point is that in those difficult years, Korean Presbyterians did not withdraw, they did not attempt a take-over, and they did not blend in. Rather, they brought their values to bear on the political situation in a way that worked for the welfare of the whole of South Korea, a nation that's now a model of democracy and prosperity.



I've been relishing my recent dive into Brick Church history in preparation for our 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year. This past week, I stumbled across several very political speeches dating from just after the War for Independence. They were given by one of Brick's clergy, the Rev. Samuel Miller, an energetic, active and erudite young assistant minister. In one speech, in 1793 to the Tammany Society (this is before it devolved into a corrupt political machine), Miller talks about the relationship between Christian faith and politics. He said this: The gospel, he said, "*tends to quench every extravagant thirst for power, to beat down every high (haughty) thought that exalteth itself against the general good...*" (Right about now, in this election, we could sure use a force that "*quenches every extravagant thirst for power*" and "*beats down every haughty thought that exalteth itself against the general good!*")

A few years later, in a speech to the New York Manumission Society of which he was a member, Miller advocated the elimination of slavery – a *very* political position – and one based on his faith. In that speech, Miller said, "*the Divine system, in which we profess to believe, teaches that God has made of one blood all the nations of men...*" Of Jesus and his Apostles Miller said, "*they taught principles and doctrines utterly abhorrent from*" the practice of slavery." My point is this, *based on his faith*, Miller advocated a very political position.

Our call is not to retreat from the world.

Our call is not to take over the world.

Our call is not to blend into the world.

Rather, our call – rooted in our faith – is to work humbly, insistently, doggedly for "the welfare of the city," the great nation of which we are a part.

*In the name of the Father of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*