

Unrest in the Quest for Peace
 Luke 19:29-42 Philippians 2:5-11
 March 28, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Luke 19:29-42 ²⁹ *When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." ⁴¹ As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.*

Philippians 2:5-11 ⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

In Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt's book *God, Prayer, and Spirituality* he tells the story of a rabbi arriving to begin work in a new congregation. The president of the congregation takes him aside and warns him that several topics should be considered taboo. "Rabbi, don't speak about *kashrut*,

because most of our members don't observe the dietary laws. And, Rabbi, it wouldn't be a good idea to speak about the Sabbath, because so many of our congregants work and do other things on Saturday. And it would most definitely not be prudent to discuss social action or *tzedekah* since so many people are sensitive and might be offended by these issues." So, the rabbi asks the president, "So what should I speak about?" To which the president replied, "Why that's easy – speak about Judaism, of course!"

If you get the joke, you already know that faith is a house where we live, not a museum displaying selected memorabilia. The rabbi's story being warned not to speak about God's demands and God's justice reminds me of the couple who came to me wanting to be married in the church but insisted there be no mention of God in the service.

Our faith informs and shapes all aspects of life. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, not a way, a truth, and a lifestyle to be modified to keep us comfortable. A vital, living faith is not easy. As G. K. Chesterton said, "It is not that Christianity was tried and found wanting; it was found difficult and not tried."

Especially it is hard to maintain a disciplined and faithful approach to our political life. "Never talk religion or politics," may be good advice for dinner conversation, but taken much further, it leaves law, legislation, and policy being determined in a moral vacuum.

Faith abhors a spiritual vacuum. Consider the following scenes from our own religious heritage. As we open on scene one, our hero, an outlaw because of his religious beliefs, escapes Paris disguised as a common laborer, but hidden beneath the coarse coat and hat is a brilliant scholar. Though his destination is Basel, he spends a night with a fellow religious reformer in Geneva, one of Europe's most boisterous towns. There he ends up staying for several years, for his friend had begged him to remain and assist in his work as a public official to restore civil order. Our hero of this scene is the father of Presbyterianism, John Calvin, theologian and politician.

Scene two. We are now in Scotland. The castle of St. Andrew is about to be overrun by French forces. Some of the defenders will be killed and some -- like John Knox -- will be captured and condemned to row in French galleys for over a year and a half. It will be another twelve years before he returns to Scotland and becomes part of the political force which, with Queen Elizabeth's help, ultimately throws off French rule. When, a year later, Mary, Queen of Scots, returns from France and seeks to reestablish Catholicism as the official religion of the realm, our preacher/politician stands up to his monarch and refuses to yield his

religious freedom. Soon, Mary loses her head; Knox keeps his, and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland becomes the prime exporter of the faith to the new colonies in America.

Scene three. We are in America at the threshold of the revolution. The churches of the colonies are divided in their loyalties, but Presbyterians, almost as a group, preach out of their tradition of self-determination and religious freedom and support independence from England. The first religious body in the colonies to officially endorse the Declaration of Independence is the Presbytery of Hanover in Virginia. In New Jersey Presbyterian clergyman John Witherspoon is elected to the Continental Congress and becomes the only clergy signer of the Declaration of Independence. He also serves the new government on committees of military procurement and foreign relations. The Rev. John Witherspoon – churchman and politician.

Scene four. We are in Alton, Illinois, shortly before the Civil War. Elijah Parish Lovejoy, Presbyterian layman, newspaper publisher and activist in the abolitionist crusade, examines his latest edition. He has been relentless in attacking the institution of slavery. It is contrary to everything he knows as a Presbyterian, and he is determined to alter the political attitudes of his day. As he wipes the ink from his fingers, he hears the noise of a mob. Moments later his printing presses are sinking into the mud of the Mississippi, and Lovejoy is murdered.

Scene five is a montage of faces. One of them is the Rev. Charles Stelzle, who headed the Presbyterian Church's first Department of Church and Labor in 1903 and who founded the Labor Temple on the East Side of New York City in an attempt to bring Christian economic principles to bear upon the political and social order. Another face is that of Norman Thomas, articulate socialist, who sought to reshape the society in an egalitarian vision. Another face is that of Donaldina Cameron who confronted the political leaders of San Francisco who had turned a blind eye toward the white slavery trade among young Chinese women in the community. Another face is that of President Woodrow Wilson who, long before the world was ready, envisioned a community of nations in league for peace. The faces continue up through our modern era, like that of Eugene Carson Blake who stood with Martin Luther King and other religious leaders in the 1963 Civil Rights March in Washington and said apologetically but prophetically, "We're late, but we are here." Today's faces are senators and representatives, advocates for prison reform and racial justice, doctors and social workers and teachers and volunteers and many of us here and in congregations like ours around the globe whose

faith won't let them be content with things as they are, because in faith they have learned the vision of the things that make for peace. Some would call this "ministry" and others would call it "troublemaking." What it is, actually, is being true to the trust that God is at work wresting from the ash heaps of history a new day where justice prevails.

Why focus on politics on Palm Sunday? Because Palm Sunday itself commemorates a political event of two thousand years ago when Jesus entered Jerusalem to the people's "Hosannas," a word reserved for the long-expected king returning to take back the throne of Israel and save the people from their oppression, the king the scriptures call *Messiah*. "Tell your disciples to be quiet," the Pharisees begged Jesus, because they knew how extremely dangerous it was to present even the appearance of allegiance to any but the authority of the Roman empire.

Armed factions were common in Palestine in Jesus' time, and Rome's policies of repression were quick and bloody. Especially during Passover, the holy day whose theme is freedom from slavery, the mood of revolution was ripe. When the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail, which may be why Jesus was crucified. Rome may not have seen any military threat in Jesus, but they didn't want his politics catching on either, which was a politics of radical transformation of the social order, a politics of egalitarian social and economic relationships, a politics of compassion and justice which decried the exploitation of the poor.

Here, then, is another scene. There were two parades in Jerusalem that day. Jesus and his followers enter the city from the east enacting in a kind of street theater demonstration the prophecies of Zechariah – *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey...and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.* [Zechariah 9:9-10]

From the west another parade enters the city. This is a military parade of Roman soldiers and centurions, drawn from outlying garrisons and armed to the teeth. The city, which had doubled its population as pilgrims arrived to celebrate Passover, was a hotbed of revolution. As the Pharisees recognized, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was a political act, one that self-consciously engaged the public imagination in dreaming the dreams of God where justice would reign because the messiah was king. Nothing is more political, and politically explosive, than proclaiming a new king in the face of a powerful and established regime.

It pushes us outside our comfort zone to mention the name Jesus and the word politics in the same sentence, but it is vital that we do so if ever we are to learn "the things that make for peace." When Calvin brought theological principles of order and justice to bear on the social chaos of Geneva, when Knox's faith enabled him to persist through hardship and gave him the courage to stare down his queen, when Witherspoon connected his faith with the issues of freedom and dignity, when social reformers of all times and places addressed the injustices of their day, they stirred up bored complacency and fomented revolution against accepted order so that something new and holy could come to life. They acted in confidence that God was invested and involved in the social and political life of the city, the nation, the world, and as believers they could be no less involved.

It is hard for many of us to accept this. Some find it far more comfortable to maintain a wall between faith and politics. Faith, they say, is personal, not public. It is about praising God, not revolution. Where would we be, though, and what kind of society would we have were it not for men and women whose vision of what is good was produced in the crucible of faith had not led us here? If we only harbor images of a sweet, benign, inoffensive Jesus who coddled children and preached about the lilies of the field, we will never become equipped to serve the God of history. If we don't also recognize Jesus the political actor, the gutsy teacher, the advocate for justice and the prophet of peace, we will have only a one-dimensional Jesus that cannot save.

Political life is messy, often ugly, and full of compromise. So, among the things that make for peace is lament – for the failure of nerve in our leaders, for the hateful speech of partisanship, for all the lamentable lapses of decency and honor that too often characterizes the process. The things that make for peace involve persons of faith, whose confidence is vested in the God of history, having the temerity to insist that our leaders speak the truth we need to hear, not the lies we want to hear.

Vaclav Havel, Czechoslovakian poet, playwright, and politician, wrote, "Hope... is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. (It is) the ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed... It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense... All power is power over someone, and it always somehow responds... to the state of mind and behavior of those it rules over."

I suggest, my friends, that as American Presbyterians we must believe that we get the politics and politicians we, as a society, deserve,

that these actually reflect our "state of mind and behavior," as Havel puts it. Does our state of mind, our behavior show the things that make for peace, that peace God calls us to seek, that Shalom where love and justice prevail? If not, let us alter the state of our minds and our actions to show that we have a theme, and the theme is Jesus the lord, Jesus the healer, Jesus the teacher, and, yes, Jesus the political citizen.