

Sunday, June 12, 2016 - Does God care how I vote?

Luke 4:14-30

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

I picked up early on in life that there are two things we don't talk about with others unless we want some arguments to crop up. What are they? Politics and religion. So to mix those two this morning seems a little dangerous. But our faith can handle it. I know our God can handle it.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove shared this week, "When people care enough to disagree, you begin to have community. Until then, being together in one place is just a get-together."

I would rather be a part of a real community that walks right into a hard issue with honesty and grace instead of politely agreeing with forced smiles. I think we grow more from the first.

So today my friends, the question in front of us is this: "Does God care how I vote?"

Today, we're going to talk about our tendency to compartmentalize our spiritual lives from the rest of our lives and we'll look at a great story about Jesus' first sermon in his hometown.

As a pastor, I walk an interesting line when it comes to politics. Am I allowed to put out a sign supporting an issue or candidate on church property or at the parsonage? What about social media? What are we allowed to do and not do, according to the IRS when it comes to our nonprofit status? Well, we're allowed to talk about the issues at hand but the church is not able to endorse a specific candidate. A church is allowed to lobby the government on a specific issue as long as it doesn't take up more than 15% of our time. Pastors are able to participate personally in the political process as long as it's on their own time and not mentioned from the pulpit and other communication channels.

So you can see, my time exploring the IRS website this week was a reminder this is a minefield to walk into. But, we follow and pattern our lives after Jesus who was equal parts gentle pastor and a subversive community activist. So here we go!

It appears to me as a 33 year old that we live in a very divisive time in our political life as a country. Those of you who've experienced our democracy longer than I have, what do you think? Is it worse now or are we just more aware because of 24/7 news coverage?

I remember tears running down my cheeks as I sat and watched the results roll in in 2007 that we had elected our first African-American president. I was overwhelmed with hope for our country. And then we all watched as our nation's leaders battled over budgets, strategy and power for the last eight years. I've stopped keeping up with much of the news. There are times it feels like I've given up on our system's abilities to progress as a country. I often turn my attention to how I can help in my local community.

We are a reconciling church. Which means we've made an intentional choice to welcome all people in this place, regardless of family structure, sexual orientation and things like our political affiliation. I've said before, this might be the most courageous statement we could make in times like these. That we want to be a community where people who lean Republican can be in conversation with people who lean Democratic. Independents can worship alongside Libertarians. That's a good thing. President Obama shared on The Tonight Show this week that we function well when our political parties are healthy. We need the balance.

But lately, the world around us doesn't advocate for that. We demonize each other. We share stories pointing out the other side's mistakes. We roll our eyes at candidates we can't stand instead of seeing them as a beloved child of God.

Speaking of our divisions, we have a strong tradition in this country of separating church and state. John Pavlovitz, an author, shared this: "Our nation's initial decision to officially separate Church and State wisely

makes sure that no group of religious people *of any kind* can enforce their beliefs on our civic system. This is good and right, but to ask someone to separate their *personal faith* from the world they live in is impossible.”

I’m tired of separating different parts of myself. Because they’re not separate. I don’t get to put my spiritual life in this box and my political life in this other box. I don’t get to put my role as a mom over here and my role as a wife over there. But somehow with politics, we expect people to “stay in their lane.” To keep politics over there and out of the way. Yes, this keeps the peace. It makes for more enjoyable dinner conversation at times. But here’s the problem with this practice: “If you are a committed person of any faith, your whole life is spiritual (Pavlovitz).”

My faith and life as a disciple of Jesus is the lens through which I see everything. It informs the way I arrange my day, how I spend my money, how I speak to my children, how I experience my community, how I vote, the food I buy and grow and the things I think about. “To suggest I separate my faith from *any* area of my life is like asking my brain to function independently from my circulatory system. The two are ultimately the same thing. Their existence is one of interdependence (Pavlovitz).”

So if you’re tired of separating your faith from the rest of your life, you’re in the right place. Jesus is not a well-behaved man full of hugs, kisses and sunshine for everyone. Jesus is not someone to sing songs about in a sanctuary for one hour each week so we can go on with the *rest of our lives* the other 6 days. We miss the whole point of living a Jesus-centered life when we separate what we do *in here* from how we live *out there*.

Now let’s turn our attention to Jesus’ first sermon. I remember my first sermon. I was about 17 years old. I was terrified and forgot what I actually said that day. But it was exhilarating. And it was kind of a mess. But God used it anyways.

Jesus’ first sermon though? It was short, sweet and perfect.

### **Read Luke 4:14-22**

Everybody loved him. He walked up to the front to read the beloved scriptures from the prophet Isaiah. Everyone would have known these words. He reads them. And he sits down.

It’s the ultimate mic drop.

“It’s about me.”

The crowd goes crazy. They can’t believe it.

### **Read Luke 4:23-30**

Their adoration turns to anger and rage. Jesus sensed the people of his hometown thought they would get special treatment because they know the “hometown boy.” Jesus firmly tells them this is not the case. Jesus places himself in a long line of prophets - people on a mission from God who weren’t usually well received. Jesus has work to do, and it’s not to fulfill the needs of all his childhood friends. He passes through the crowd and goes on his way. In a sense, he leaves his hometown and makes his home among the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed.

So was Jesus always full of hugs, kisses and sunshine? No. He’s here to release prisoners, give sight to the blind and liberate the oppressed. In the systems of our day and for each individual person. Jesus wants to do that for **you**. And for the broken systems in our world that push people down. **Jesus always takes the side of the person with the least power and invites us to do the same** (Rohr).

Did Jesus separate the politics of his day from his experience of God? No. Neither should we.

We can't divide something that's one. Our lives are meant to be one whole element. We were created by one God who cannot be divided or portioned out. The whole thing is spiritual. **Much of our pain comes from dividing things that were meant to be whole.**

Pavlovitz says it well: "Jesus wasn't urging people to withdraw into a cloistered, monk-like religious bubble existence, and he wasn't asking them to suppress their beliefs to keep the peace with the culture around them either. Jesus was compassionate shepherd to the sheep in his care, and he was a defiant defender squarely up in the snorting faces of the wolves. He gave equal time to transforming people's hearts and to renovating social structures. If we try to only hold on to one aspect and not the other, we do so at the risk of creating and replicating a counterfeit Jesus."

"He preached a countercultural Kingdom of God which stood in sharp contrast to the Roman Empire, the strongest political force in the world at the time. To be obedient to God and faithful to the teachings of Jesus in this time, by its very nature **became a political statement.** It had to, because of how differently it called a person to live in the world. **Nothing has changed.**"

Ultimately, are these political matters or spiritual ones?

- Eliminating poverty?
- Caring for the planet?
- Ensuring equality for all people?
- Confronting violence and bigotry?
- Caring for sick people?
- Avoiding war when possible?
- Protecting the vulnerable and young in our midst?
- Fighting government corruption?

It's all spiritual.

Yes, God cares how we vote. It's how we make our voice heard. If our faith compels us to speak truth to power in a certain way, we are encouraged to do so. It's time to stop separating our politics from our faith. It's all spiritual. Our vote is one way we bring about the good news of Jesus Christ in this world.

And by the way, if you're rolling your eyes that no candidate or person could ever bring about good news in our world today -- then it's up to each of us to stop rolling our eyes and do something about bringing good news to our community - we cannot let our vote become our only contribution to bringing good news to our hurting world.

So the kids in Snohomish County who need clothes? You're giving them **good news.**

The homeless in Marysville who need a warm lunch on Mondays? You're giving them **good news.**

Those with young kids & grandkids looking for a place to connect in a playgroup? You're giving them **good news.**

The families in eastern Washington who lost their home and are now seeing it built again from the ashes? You're giving them **good news.**

All our friends, family & strangers going through a difficult time who receive a prayer quilt? You're giving them **good news.**

Jesus lived, loved and died bringing **good news** to a hurting world. May we continue to do the same through every area of our lives, because it's all spiritual. Amen.