

A Non-Election Year Election Sermon

Jeremiah 7:1-7,11; Luke 19:41-46

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Let me say a word about the strange title of this sermon, "A Non-Election Year Election Sermon." It is a non-election year, but it's not really a non-election year because we did have elections, but we didn't have elections on the national or state issues or candidates, and so my point of saying it is a non-election year is it is a time without the intensity of feeling or concern about particular issues. At such a time, when there are not pressing issues upon us where there is likely to be polarization and strong feelings, it is the best time to look at how we deal with those kinds of social, political, national, world issues that confront us as a people. So, I call it an election sermon, not necessarily a good name for what I am trying to talk about, but what I mean is a sermon that would be preached in the light of a democratic people casting their votes and making up their minds on issues and candidates on the basis of some sense of awareness of the spiritual dimension of the issues or the candidates that are being placed before us.

I got the idea from a great English preacher, Henry Perry Liddon, who was a 19th century intelligent, scholarly, conservative, evangelical Anglican preacher who held the pulpit of great St. Paul's in London. When I was in seminary, we studied some of the great preachers and Liddon was one of the models, and I began then to buy used volumes of Liddon's sermons from England, accumulating a shelf full of them. I would go back to those sermons many, many times, and occasionally I would read a particular sermon of his, the title of which I can't remember. I could remember if I could have gone to my shelf and picked up the book and found it, but I sold the book last summer. Dumb thing to do. There was no need to do it and it was the first time I'd sold some books and I'm sorry.

Liddon would annually preach a sermon in great St. Paul's that would address the issues, the critical issues that were facing the English people. He did this very responsibly, very scholarly, in a marvelous manner. I suppose that it was the Church of England's counterpart to the Queen's annual address to Parliament. Maybe it was something like, in our situation, the President's State of the Union Address. It was a sermon that addressed the nation and those critical issues that were before it. Of course, this was simply because in England the Church is established. The Queen appoints the Archbishop of Canterbury, and so there is

the union of Church and State still in England to this day. But, what was going on there was that the Church had a voice addressing critical issues of a social political nature, like the Hebrew prophets.

Israel began as a theocracy. God was the sovereign. But, there came a point, remember, when Samuel was the leader and the people came and said, "We want a king so we'll be like other nations," and he said, "You'll be sorry." They said, "Nonetheless." So, a king was appointed and Israel became a monarchy. However, the prophetic office arose along with the monarchy and those who study these things tell us that Israel was saved from the autocratic rule of despots that marked their neighbors by that prophetic office that always reminded the king that he was the king by the good pleasure of God who alone was sovereign. The king was anointed by the priest with oil, the sign of the Holy Spirit, the sign that he was a servant of God, he was not autonomous.

Once again, this was natural because there were not separate state and religious establishments in Israel. It was all one and the temple was the center of that. The text we read this morning is Jeremiah's famous Temple Sermon, in which he stands on the steps of the temple as the people are coming to worship and says, "Don't say, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" In other words, don't find your security in the fact that there is a temple here which you can attend, which is the symbolic center, the seat of God's presence in your midst. Don't take that for granted. Don't think that you can violate the covenant community life that was characteristic of God's people Israel, the doing of justice, the care for the marginalized and the poor and the weak, and total devotion to Yahweh. In the society of the day, in Jeremiah's time, there was corruption, they were violating this and Jeremiah was saying to them, "Babylon is coming and exile is imminent because it will be the judgment of God for your failure to live according to the covenant of God."

Jesus picked up that text from Jeremiah, combining it with one from Isaiah, "My house shall be a house of prayer. You've made it a den of thieves." In other words, you think you can go out and do all kinds of corporate scandals and so forth, and then come hide in the temple and somehow or other you will be sheltered from judgment because you're hiding within the temple. You have made the temple a den of robbers, a den of thieves. And so, Jesus was picking up that same prophetic role of the Hebrew prophet. He was a prophet in the best sense of the word. There again, one didn't have the political establishment and the religious establishment. There was a nation whose political-religious reality was all one, with the temple as the symbolic center of it all. I suppose one could say it was natural for the prophet to address Israel as that special people of God.

What do we do? We are an experiment, a very marvelous experiment in the separation of Church and State. Thomas Jefferson's image of that wall of separation between Church and State, that wall is being chipped away in our day, to our hurt. I want to be very clear that I affirm the separation of Church and

State. I believe that our nation was born in that age of reason, that dynamic period of human history, the Enlightenment, post-French Revolution, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," all of that democratic ferment rising to the surface. Our nation was an experiment throwing off all of that baggage of the European systems and all forms of authoritarianism, lifting up the inalienable rights of the human being. That was a great breakthrough in human experience. I do not trust organized religion. I do not trust organized religion with power. There has been too much tragedy, too much violence in the history of humankind that has used religion as its fuel. I affirm our situation of separation of Church and State.

My question to you this morning is a serious question and a sincere question. I come to you asking you to consider a question, not having an answer for you. My question is: Given that we have the separation of Church and State, how does the Church play its role over against the State in order that in the issues that we as a people face, the spiritual dimension of those issues might be lifted up?

Obviously, in the political establishment, there is going to be political rhetoric, propagandizing, campaigning of all forms and shapes, opposing parties, and that's all part of our political system and it has its strong points, and it can have some weak points. But how do we as a people, a religious community, a people who want to have more than politics as usual, more than just pragmatism, more than just expediency, more than elections being able to be bought and paid for, how do we bring the spiritual dimension before the people so that, when we cast our votes, or when we make our decisions as a nation, we have become aware, a consciousness has been raised, as to the spiritual aspects of those respective issues or candidates for whom we will be asked to decide? With the separation of Church and State - how does the Church exercise its responsibility for the whole people, for the well-being of society? That is an honest question that I want you to think about with me this morning, because our situation is somewhat unique and, as I think about this, I think about my own story.

I came out of school and to this congregation in 1960 and I was a salvation preacher. I really believed that my responsibility was to preach the Gospel, to call my people to repentance and to faith in Jesus Christ in order that they might have their sins forgiven and the hope of eternal life. I didn't really have to deal with issues of political, economic, social implication. I didn't deal with them. I didn't think... I was raised on the cliché, "Religion and politics don't mix." In my early years, it wasn't a problem.

Then I left here and went to New Jersey and during that time the Vietnam War situation was becoming critical and I can remember hearing the prophetic voices and protests and realizing that we were in a fix, but it ended; we left without victory or honor, and I had not raised my voice. I was growing restless about that because I was recognizing more and more what a large slice of life was not taken into account in my ministry.

Then I went to Europe, but what I had to do was take a theological bath. I had to figure it out theologically and biblically and that's where my growing edge was. For four years, I wrestled. It was really the first education I got. It was the first time I ever asked an honest question or really sought an answer that I didn't start out with. I had gone to school until age 25 using every bit of intellectual power I had to buttress the presuppositions that I imbibed with my mother's milk. It's a tragedy, but it's true. But, I had to do it theologically and biblically. For the last 30 years here, I've been dragging you kicking and screaming through this experience of trying to figure out how to translate the theological tradition into a relevant statement for today, how to re-imagine the faith and spiritual life.

I'm so delighted that Ian Lawton is coming here without all that baggage that I've carried and dragged along and bothered you with, so that he can start out fresh with all of the enthusiasm and optimism and joy of finding out what it means to live a spiritual life in the 21st century. Isn't it going to be fun? It's going to be so much fun. But, what we've been through has brought us to the point where we're ready for that.

But I'm asking you now myself, in the springtime of my senility: How should this kind of thing be handled in a nation that values the separation of Church and State, and yet certainly wouldn't advocate that its whole national life be devoid of spiritual commentary, spiritual comment? How could we do that?

It is one thing to enunciate ideals and principles, but they have to land somewhere. It is easier to look in retrospect and try to think about those things. That's why I keep coming back to Bonhoeffer so often, because here was a Christian man who really in his heart believed that to follow Jesus was to be a pacifist, who saw what was going on in his nation and who said explicitly, "I have to choose whether to will the downfall of my nation in order that Western civilization may be saved, rather than the success of my nation which will be the destruction of Western civilization." Here was a Christian thinker who was really a pacifist, who was wrenched in his soul, who put himself in the place of a conspirator's to assassinate Hitler, an act, a concrete act. His ideal, his passion had to find concrete action. He didn't just do that on the side. He also preached it until they cut him off the air. O, blest be the preacher who gets cut off, you see, because he is saying something that's touching the nerve, that is, as Luther would say, addressing where the battle is raging. How do we do that?

We, as a church community, generally in this country have pretty much operated on the basis that religion and politics don't mix, and you may say, "I don't come to church to hear politics." Okay. Then tell me, how does Christian faith, how does biblical faith, how does a prophetic witness lift awareness and raise consciousness so that we might be helped to see a larger picture and choose wisely? I know we can do it in various ways, and that is done here. We're going to do it here next week. We're going to do it here following the service today.

Joel Toppen is going to talk about The American Empire, and that's good because that's a forum and there are questions and answers and interaction. Next week, Howard VanTill will talk about Intelligent Design and that's very pertinent right now. It is a state issue. Our state is focused by these right-wing forces that want to get Creationism back into the school, and next week Howard will lecture and demonstrate. I was so glad for the wonderful interview in the paper with him where he was able to say, "Trying to get Creationism in the school is a stealth approach and it's bad theology and it's bad science." It is important because three of the legislators who sponsor these bills come from Western Michigan. I was so happy in the article that our Representative Barbara VanderVeen was quoted because she says she's for this because she believes in a Creator! That's ignorance! Of course we believe in a Creator! That's not the point. If you sponsor a bill in the legislature, you ought to understand something about it, I would think.

Tomorrow night come to the Circle of Friends. You don't have to be gay, you can just be happy. The issue there is important. We have again in our state this ridiculous idea about defining marriage constitutionally, and the Ottawa County Commissioners are being asked to support such a constitutional amendment. It really is an attack on the gay-lesbian community, and that paranoid fear about same sex unions. So, it's good in those forums because there is talk-back.

But, I raise the question: How can we handle it as a community as a whole? Otherwise, what the Church becomes in its worship is an irrelevant gathering of like-minded people trying to find comfort and security, a kind of ritual society that is unrelated to where we really live. We really live in the broader culture. We really deal with these broader issues. There should be the light of the word of God. I don't have the word of God, but I should be responsible at least to lift up these things in order that we might think about it together and in order that we might vote with great diversity but with intentionality so that we know and we have thought about it so that we have not simply on national issues submitted or yielded to tribalism and nationalism, which is sin. That we have thought about it in the presence of the God who transcends every border and who transcends every image that the respective religions have of God. I don't want the militant Religious Right, which for the last two or three decades has really gotten into the fray, to be the only voice of people who value the spiritual dimension. I want an intelligent, passionate, open, liberal congregation like this, not as a congregation. We don't need to do it together. But, where you are, do it intelligently and seriously.

How can we do this? I would be satisfied this morning if you would go out of here and if you would say, "Dick has raised an honest and a real question." I have to quit; I have so much good stuff here, I can't ... You're going to have to come back another time. It's really good stuff.

I knew I was going to be handling this and I knew that I was handling it, but I don't know how to handle this, so at Duba's table last Tuesday, I said, "Duncan, you had this powerful pulpit in the city for all of those many years." Of course, Duncan always gets after me and tells me in no uncertain terms how to do it. Don said, "Duncan, you were a preacher that preached. Dick is a pastor who preaches." Duncan would wail away from that pulpit and he was oblivious to who was out there. He spoke to issues local, national, with a powerful prophetic voice. He had the kind of armor about him which I don't have. Right now they're doing a movie on Gerald Ford and he is being filmed because when Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon, his assistant counseled with Duncan Littlefair and Duncan went into the pulpit and advocated the forgiving of Richard Nixon. From Grand Rapids a pulpit that touched the nation's capital. Relevance! Power! Prophetic!

I'd rather be your priest. I really would.

Last week, All Saints Day, candles, remembering those we've loved and lost a while, and I sat up there and watched you stream forward to receive the Eucharist. It is so deeply moving. Then I could speak to you about how the secret of dying well is living well. In the narthex, Michael Bouman came up and said, "Dick, the timing was right. Tomorrow my Dad's going to go off the respirator." He said, "I want to take the tape," and he took the tape. Monday they took Michael's father off the respirator, but he was able to be with the family. Mr. and Mrs. Bouman listened to the sermon, Tuesday morning he died. That's what I really love to be about. We'll never lose that here. But, this is too important a place and the world has critical issues too important for us not to deal with the larger picture, for the well-being of society, for the healing of nations, for the creation of global community.

I'll consider this morning a success if you go out of here saying, "It's an honest question. I have to think about it." And if you'll promise me never, never to say, "I didn't come to church for politics."