

God's Expectations
Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-46
October 1 / 2, 2011—16th Sunday after Pentecost **Pastor George Carlson**

Politics and religion. Have you heard the advice to not talk about politics and religion at a family reunion? Not to bring those up in polite conversation? That a preacher can talk about religion but never about politics in the pulpit?

The authors of some of the book in the Bible would get in trouble today in some congregations, perhaps here at Covenant. They did not know that they should not discuss politics as well as religion.

In this nation, the USA, we value the separation of church and state. The state should not mess with the church and the church should not mess with politics. I under this principle to mean that the state does not, can not favor or establish one church religion and the church does not, can not rule the government. Many of our forebears came to this nation seeking freedom of religion as well as freedom from oppressive government. The church here would not rule the state, the state would not rule the church.

But what about politics and religion? Politics differs from the state, from government. Listen to these definitions: *politics—the complex or aggregate of relationships of people in society, especially those relationships involving authority or power, or politics—any activity concerned with the acquisition of power, gaining one's own ends.* Neither talk about the state or government but focus on authority or power. So we talk about school politics or office politics or church politics, often in a negative way. But in reality we need relationships and ways to live together that keep everyone safe and secure, that we can count on for stability, that provide an environment in which we can survive and thrive, that protect us from exploitation, that guarantee basic rights . So people in every culture organize in some way, engage in politics. That fits with another definition: *politics—the practice or study of the art and science of forming, directing, and administrating states and other political units; the art and science of government.*

Martin Luther recognized that need when he wrote The Small Catechism. In explaining the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," he asked, "What is meant by daily bread?" Then he wrote: "Everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body, such as meat, drink, clothing, shoes, house, homestead, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious servants, pious and faithful magistrates, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like." If, as Luther wrote, daily bread includes faithful government officials and good government, then when we pray the Lord's Prayer, a religious act, we enter the political realm.

While we live in a nation that separates church and state, we do not live in a nation that separates religion and politics. If our beliefs about God influence our day-to-day words and actions, if our lives express what we deeply value, then our work in society—the

realm of politics—will reflect our religious foundation. We heard today’s readings from prophet Isaiah and the gospel of Matthew both link religion and politics.

The prophet Isaiah could not remain silent when he saw how those in authority, those with power, governed the nation. So he wrote this amazing poem. He begins by reminding the readers that the creator of the vineyard labored in love; he dug and cleared it of stones—reminds me of my childhood on the farm, gathering stones. He planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it to protect it and then hewed out a wine vat in it because of his hope for and expectation of a good harvest. But then the prophet takes a dramatic turn, pointing to the reality of what happened—unrealized expectations, not good grapes but wild grapes. The creator had done every thing needed to produce what he expected but the vineyard went did not yield the expected results. So he decides to start over completely. And in the last line we read both the religion and the politics:

*For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of
Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected **justice**, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry!*

In that society the government came out of the chosen people, Israel. The LORD had high expectations... **justice** and **righteousness**. In the very first chapter in Isaiah we read, “*Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek **justice**, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*” (Isaiah 1:16-17) These words, addressed to the plural “you”, to all in society, show that **justice** lines us up with the poor, the powerless, the defenseless. But instead of **justice** and **righteousness** the people experienced bloodshed, violence, crying.

Isaiah does not stand alone in speaking boldly to the expectations of the creator of the vineyard, the world. The Old Testament mentions **justice** 124 times.

Do we hear? Do we get it? Our God expects **justice** and **righteousness**! And we, all on this planet, suffer when we do not produce those good grapes.

Now we may think we get off the hook with Jesus. After all, he came to forgive and reconcile, right? Indeed he did...no doubt about that. He came to bring the very kingdom of God near, right here and now. Does that mean he dismisses God’s expectations of **justice** and **righteousness**?

We need only zero in on the parable we read today. Like Isaiah, he begins with the active creator of the vineyard, laboring in love to establish a fruitful vineyard. Like our creator God, he turns over the vineyard to others to manage, just as God entrusts us with care of the planet so all on earth will have what they need. Have you ever built something or created something and given it away, trusting that the receiver will take care of it as you expect? In his story, Jesus has the owner expecting his share of the fruit, like a land owner who rents his land on shares. We heard the story, how the

tenants did not live up to expectations, both withholding the owners share and treating his representative violently, even killing his very son as well as some of the other representatives. And then Jesus asked that crucial question: "What will he do to those tenants?" The religious leaders answer, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time." We witness a "gotcha" moment. Those religious leaders realize that Jesus has zeroed in on them as missing God's expectations, as neglecting to do as God required of them. Rather than sharing their bounty with others, they wanted it for themselves. Rather than allowing the owner to receive his rightful share, they live violently to keep what they can. Here Jesus confronts religious leaders who seek to hold on to their authority and power. This powerful parable points to their abuse of their authority and power. We witness a political struggle between Jesus and those leaders.

How do these texts speak to us? For me, they call me to examine my life as a follower of Jesus in this country and as a follower of Jesus as a religious leader. The God who created me and you in love has provided all we need to produce good fruit, to strive for **justice**, to seek to live the right way.

How am I doing? How are you doing? Are we listening to our God who expects **justice** and **righteousness**? Do we hear Jesus begin his ministry by reading these words from the prophet Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" (Luke 4:18-19) Do those words we hear become a guide for us in seeking **justice**? Do they inform us, guide us, in our actions toward the homeless and the hungry? Did they bring together the quilters to share with the poor, often victims of oppression or natural disasters? Do they raise questions and call us to action when we hear of new immigrants working 60 hours a week and being paid \$1,000.00 a month in cash? Do they bring us to stand with the kid who keeps being bullied? Do we raise our voice if a woman faces harassment in our work place? Does the call for **justice** and **righteousness** make a difference in how we vote for candidates for office in government when we hear their positions tax or health or immigration policies?

Jesus calls us to follow him, and that takes us into the lives of the poor, the captives of injustice, the blind, the oppressed. Every day we have opportunities to make a difference. But I know I need God's Spirit to give me courage, to make me bold like Isaiah, to give me voice like Jesus, so my religion informs my politics and my politics reflects my religion. As God's Spirit works in and through you and me, we will serve as ambassadors for the reign of God where "...**justice** rolls down like waters, and **righteousness** like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:4) Then, by God's grace and Spirit's power, we will live up to God's expectations!