

## ***Justice Matters*** Remarks – June 8, 2020

Faith and politics. Use those two words in the same sentence and people can start getting nervous. A “complaint” I have often heard from members of congregations in the denomination in which I serve (the ELCA – Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) is that the “pastor is preaching politics from the pulpit.” Obviously in their minds, that is not appropriate because faith should not be involved with politics.

But I want to argue this evening that not only do faith and politics belong together, but that faith itself is political. (So how nervous did I just make some of you with that statement?) By that statement I am not talking about partisan politics where we divide along party lines and demonize those on the other side; that in order to be a person of faith you must be a Democrat or you must be a Republican, you must support this person or this policy, and so forth. What I mean is what Rev. Walter Taylor captured so well in a quote found in the short booklet *Beyond Guilt and Powerlessness* written back in the late 1980’s: *Politics determines the kind of world you will be born in; the kind of education, health care, and job you eventually get; how you will spend your old age and even how you die. The church (and I would any tradition of faith) must address itself and involved in anything that affects life as great as this.*

By politics – a word that is derived from the Greek word “polis” which means city affairs, how the collective community is organized and functions - I mean the public sphere of our common life together as members of society, how we structure that life through laws and institutions, policies and practices. And faith is not, contrary to the understanding of some, primarily a set of doctrines that an individual must believe in order to be saved and by the way if you don’t believe what I believe than your are judged and condemned. Rather faith is trust in a relationship with God that connects us to one another (for all are created in the image of God), connects us to the whole created world. So if we are connected to one another in this common life that we share on this planet, how can we not be political?

This organization, Justice Matters, has used your voice to speak out against spending millions of dollars for jail expansion in this county. Should the church be involved in these things? I would say “yes.” 6000 neighbors of your community, most of whom are poor, disproportionately brown and black, often with battling addictions and mental illnesses, and

increasingly women, churn in and out of your jail every year. It is our responsibility to be voices of love, restoration, compassion and justice. Two years ago you said no more studies, we need action on affordable housing. And now millions of dollars have been set aside for housing nonprofit organizations to build affordable housing on a scale never seen before in the history of our church.

How can we not care about the structures and systems that affect those to whom we are connected? And how can our faith which trusts this reality of all being created in the image of God, of all having value and worth, of all being connected, not include working for justice?

I am a person of faith. I grew up in the Lutheran church attending worship and Sunday school, learning the stories of God's love for the world through the life and teachings of Jesus. Because God loved the world, because Jesus taught that greatest is not measured in power to lord over others but in service to care for the least, that all have a place at the table, and because I knew that I was saved by grace (I didn't have to earn any reward) I was called to focus on loving my neighbor. But I have to admit that this focus on loving my neighbor was pretty narrow and individualist. Yes, it is good to donate food to those who are hungry, for example, to do works of charity. But why are people hungry? Is it because there truly isn't enough food or that it is unevenly and unjustly distributed? Why are so many people living in poverty? Why is there such a gap between the median income of those who are white and persons of color? Why is it more dangerous for a black young man to be on the streets than for me as a white woman? Those are political questions. It is about politics – how we have structured a society that has racism and white privilege woven into its very fabric. And it is about faith.

Faith enables us to see the truth that this is God's world, that this is God's reign and that every individual in their rich, unique diversity has a place at God's table. Faith helps us see the truth that God throughout the ancient Scriptures and teachings that guide this faith, is a God of mercy and justice, is on the side of the oppressed, the excluded, the downtrodden. I had a seminary professor who told us something in class one day that I have never forgotten: *Be very careful about dividing people into us and them because Jesus (who for me as a Christian helps me see God most clearly) is always on the other side with them.*

The reality of this pandemic has divided us – actually the divisions have always been there, we just didn't want to be honest about them. The murder of George Floyd and so many other unarmed black persons has revealed the depth of the injustice and divisions that have fractured our society, this common life we share. It is painful and uncomfortable, heartbreaking and confusing – how can we best respond?

Faith gives us the courage to be honest about this brokenness, this injustice and our participation in it and to step up to speak out, to act, to advocate, to work for changes that create systems of justice. We cannot hide behind an arbitrary line between sacred and secular – this is the arena for faith, but out there, that is up to the politicians. God is and always has been out there – working not only through different faith traditions but also through all who work for justice. I believe that we are all called to step out into this public sphere, to be political in the best sense of the word to work for structures and systems of justice. I know that justice matters to God. It matters to our neighbors. It matters to our common life together. How can it not matter to our faith?