

“The Peaceable Kingdom”

CNN didn't show up. I'd like to think it was the snow, but I had really had my doubts all along. On Wednesday an assistant to Candy Crowley, Senior Political Correspondent at CNN called me and we talked for quite a while. They're intrigued that not all people of faith are Evangelical Christians, and that there are some folks actually talking about moral values and not marching lockstep to a particular political party or candidate. Why, they wanted to know, did progressive Christians suddenly want to be involved in politics?

I asked if she were serious about wanting to have this discussion. I said I thought she was asking some very important and substantive questions, but that if she was looking for a fifteen second sound byte or for somebody to go on camera and call Pat Robertson the anti-Christ, she probably had the wrong guy. I used the word “nuanced.” She assured me that they really were interested, and we made an appointment for 3:00 on Thursday afternoon. They were going to bring a camera. Maybe I was going to meet Candy Crowley. Remember how Andy Warhol said that in the future everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes? Maybe my future was arriving! But I still couldn't quite believe they were all that interested.

So as the snow was falling, when Wendy Knowles stuck her head in my office at 2:50 on Thursday afternoon and announced that CNN had called to cancel, I wasn't all that surprised; disappointed perhaps, and a bit relieved, but not surprised.

In any event, for whatever it's worth, here's what I think I might have said.

It seems to me to be true that progressive Christians are more politically engaged now than in some recent election cycles. In the short term picture, there are a couple of dynamics at work. First of all, people who have thought of themselves as in the mainline, specifically members of established Protestant denominations, more and more find themselves pushed toward the sideline of society. Evangelicals have credibility and clout that they never had before. When you're truly in the mainline, you get kind of settled and cautious, tending the status quo. But when you feel yourself on the fringes of things there is less to lose, and you see a clearer difference between your values and what prevails in society at large. We've found our voice in part because we feel ourselves being pushed around. That's pretty superficial, but it's there.

Secondly, there is genuine moral outrage in many circles regarding some of our present trends and policies. Somehow in our political conversation the term “moral values” has been reduced to specific stands on abortion and sexuality. But a lot of people see profound moral issues at stake elsewhere, such as in denying civil rights—including the right to legal marital status—to gays and lesbians; a foreign policy that sanctions invading a nation that never attacked us; a growing gap between rich and poor; millions of people without health care; material gluttony that leads to woeful stewardship of the

earth; and our often xenophobic approaches to immigration issues. To many progressive Christians *these* are faith-grounded moral issues that are profoundly energizing.

But... and here's the huge point... caring about these issues does not lead everybody to the same political conclusions about how to approach them, let alone to particular candidates. Churches that produce their so-called "Voter Guides" that connect the dots for their folks and lead them to vote or caucus for particular individuals because presumably these are the candidates Jesus would support are guilty of what I call inappropriate certitude; not to mention perhaps being in violation of IRS 501C3 status. These issues are complicated, and people of faith and reason can and do disagree about them. As Bill Coffin loved to say—something I quote often—"It is one thing to say with the prophet Amos, 'Let justice roll down like mighty waters.' It is another thing altogether to work out the irrigation system." Religion is about proclaiming God's passion for justice. Politics is plumbing.

I was excited about the fact that this interview with CNN was to take place on Thursday. That was December 6, the precise date of our 150th Anniversary. I was ready to quote our motto: "We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve." And I was going to note that the United Church of Christ in general and Plymouth Church in particular have always been involved in political issues: from abolition to women's suffrage to war and peace to civil rights to open and affirming to environmental issues to you name it. We encourage people to be involved. We tell them it is their duty to live their faith in the public arena. We offer training in the caucus process in both the Republican and the Democratic manifestations—and they are quite different. We work with other faith communities through AMOS to identify issues of concern to people of faith and to encourage folks, whoever their candidates may be, to raise those faith-related issues. But we don't tell people how to vote. I was going to tell CNN with great pride that the two previous Lieutenant Governors of Iowa, wonderful public servants and people of faith, have been members of Plymouth Church—one a Republican, Joy Corning; and the other a Democrat, Sally Pederson.

The real surprise, it seems to me, is not that there are Christians other than evangelicals who are trying to live their faith in the political arena. The real historical anomaly was when the evangelicals got involved about twenty-five years ago. Prior to that time they had been extremely critical of so-called "activist churches" like us—people who always seemed to have a political agenda. The criticism then was that we didn't preach the Gospel—which was all about saving souls—because we were too enmeshed with the world. We don't hear that criticism so much any more.

The other thing to note is that the automatic alliance of Evangelical Christianity and the right wing of the Republican Party is not so automatic any more. Evangelical Christians increasingly are expressing concern about issues like the environment and poverty, largely because they see these issues as biblical issues. I would most heartily agree. And so even for these folks, the complexity of the relationship between religious conviction and political activity is evident. This whole conversation simply cannot be reduced to a point-counterpoint, dueling-sound-bytes kind of analysis.

So... how much of that do you think CNN would have been interested in? No much, I'll wager.

But I hope such conversation is interesting in church. These issues are extremely relevant to the Second Sunday of Advent, because this is the Sunday of peace; and because in the view of the prophet Isaiah peace is both a political and a spiritual reality. In our lesson for today we find a description of a king whom God will raise up to bring about peace. And that peace—God’s shalom—will permeate both human society and all of God’s good creation.

What is particularly clear about Isaiah’s announced king is that the spirit of God will “rest” on him. The ruler will not be divine; nor will he encompass or contain the divine. This is in marked contrast to the claims of other rulers in the ancient world. Rather, God’s Spirit will rest on the ruler, granting spiritual gifts that will allow this reign to accomplish God’s will. What is fascinating is the nature of those gifts and the outcome of that will.

God’s Spirit is the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might. But the root of all of these spiritual gifts is the fear of the LORD. Probably the best way to understand this fear is to think of it as holy awe. The king knows that there is a God, and it is not the king. The righteous king is a servant of God. And the king delights in this role: “His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.”

It is this relationship with God that will give the king a moral gyroscope. He will not be swayed or diverted by appearances: “he shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear.” It’s not that he won’t pay attention; it’s that he won’t be distracted away from the king’s central purpose. And what is that? “With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” The king is all about justice, and particularly about looking out for those who cannot look out for themselves. This is God’s passion; and it is the king’s mandate.

The scene shifts abruptly in our lesson from a description of the righteous ruler to an idyllic image of shalom as it is reflected in creation. Creation is ordered for the benefit of all, but particularly for the benefit of human beings; for in this vision domestic animals are safe from and at peace with their predators. A little child—not a specific child, but a generic meek and vulnerable human being—will be safe among the wild animals, who will be at peace in one another’s presence.

This is a startling image, really, and vastly at odds with our everyday experience of the world. Woody Allen captured this well when he remarked, “When the lion lies down with the lamb, the lamb doesn’t get much sleep!” But why will creation be at peace in this way? Because “... the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.” That’s an interesting image in its own right, because the waters don’t cover the sea, they *are* the sea. The earth will not just be filled with the glory of God; it will be God’s glory, reflective of God’s purposes. And the king (remember the king?) will be a sign to all the nations. This is a vision that transcends the national aspirations of Israel.

It is often remarked that there can be no peace without security, and I think this is true. But in the peaceable kingdom, both politically and in terms of creation, security does not come from threat of force. In the political realm, people are secure because the poor are provided for. We don’t need bigger and bigger weapons to hold off enemies and

bigger and bigger walls to keep out foreigners. And in creation security comes from all the elements being in a proper relationship to one another.

This is the vision of peace before us as we await the coming of the one we call Prince of Peace. That it seems so greatly at odds with the world we know could be cause for despair. But through faith the vision of the peaceable kingdom serves instead to remind us of our need for God; and for God's forgiveness and love in the transformation of our lives and our world. And the vision calls us to work for the kind of peace that is God's peace—peace with justice—through all the many political avenues available to us.

Amen

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