

“Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World”
 “Where Faith and Politics Meet”

Edmund Burke said, “All that is required for evil to prevail is for good [people] to do nothing.” Adam Hamilton said, “Our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience to get involved in the political process.” Today we’re starting a new message series where we’re asking the question, “How do we live out our faith in public life?” We’re going to be looking at faith, morality and politics. And how we can see some gray in a black and white world in these areas. We’ll be looking at questions like, “How does our faith call us to be engaged in the public arena and how do we do that in a way that’s faithful to what Jesus taught?” Throughout this series I’ll be drawing quite a bit of information from Adam Hamilton’s book called *Seeing Gray* and if you want to go deeper you might want to buy a copy.

But today we’re going to focus on where faith and politics meet. As we get ready to do this I remember being taught as a kid, and hearing at various times in my life, that there are two things you don’t discuss in polite company: religion and politics. And today we are going to talk about both of them!

Generally, you will allow me to talk about religion on a regular basis. But having a preacher talk to us about politics makes us all a little bit nervous. Some of you might be saying to yourself, “Is he going to tell us who to vote for and what we are supposed to do in elections?” Let me promise you this: By the time that we’re done today, you will still not know who I’m going to vote for in the elections. And if you do know, let me know, because I don’t know.

The goal is not to convince you who you should vote for, but instead it is to convince you that you should be involved. As people of faith you **must** be involved in the political process

Let’s start by talking about **why** people of faith are essential to the political process. And to do that let’s look at the definition of these two words: Faith and politics. One definition of faith is this: **Our beliefs about God, about what it means to be human and about what is right and wrong are the center of faith.** But even if you are not a believer in God you still have faith. The reality is that all of us have core values and beliefs about what it means to be human, about what is right and wrong, and what is just and unjust.

When you begin to understand that this is what faith is (your core values and beliefs) then the fact is, we already bring our faith the issue of politics. Faith and politics are already combined whether we think so or not.

Let’s think about the definition of politics for a minute. Gore Vidal looked at the etymology of the word and offered this definition of politics: Poly meaning “many” and tics meaning “blood sucking parasites.” I don’t think that is really what politics is about! One common definition of politics is this: **“Politics is the process for determining who gets what, when and how.”** (Harold Lasswell)

So, politics is about power; it’s about distribution; it’s about control. When you think of it this way, if politics is about determining these things, then it requires some sense of what’s right and wrong, what is just or unjust. Which goes right back to core beliefs and values. So politics requires people of faith to be engaged in the process--people with a moral conscience, and people who have thoughtfully considered the issues.

If you’ve followed the campaigns of Obama and McCain, you know that both candidates have made strong statements about the faith and both have made clear statements that their faith plays a role in their leadership, in their decision-making.

So if the candidates acknowledge that faith and politics are intertwined, then how do we do it? Well, it needs to be done very carefully. With that in mind let’s look at **three mistakes that can be made as we bring our faith to bear in politics.**

When it comes to involving our faith in politics the first critical mistake that sometimes is made, and it can be dangerous, is **to use the language of faith, and religion, as a disguise for justifying evil.** You’ve seen this. In the name of Jesus people have done a lot of things that were evil and wrong.

Now the third Commandment tells us not to use God’s name in vain, or to misuse the name of God. We think of this as having to do with cussing but that’s just a small application. This commandment is really more about speaking on behalf of God to claim things that God himself never would have claimed. Do you

know who violates the third Commandment in this way the most? The first are preachers. The second are politicians.

So we want to be careful when a politician begins to use religion as a way of rallying support for a particular position. Now it might be that their position is consistent with the kingdom of God, but it's also possible that it is not. So if we see God's name being stuck on something that actually hurts people we should be very, very afraid.

Let me give you an example of a politician who did this. See if you can figure out who it was who said this. This was a stump speech. *"I say, my Christian feeling tells me that my Lord and Savior is a warrior. It calls my attention to the man who, lonely and surrounded by a few supporters, recognized what they [the Jews] really were, and called for a battle against them. And who by God was not the greatest sufferer but the greatest warrior [Jesus]."*

Do you know who said that? Adolf Hitler said that in 1922 as he rallied the Nazi party throughout Germany. Be careful when people use religious language to gain power. We should critique this kind of language and be cautious. They may be speaking the truth about what God would uphold, but they may not be.

The second major mistake when it comes to religion and politics is **to oversimplify complex issues**. If you have an absolute opinion about what is right and wrong and you are unwilling to question your own perceptions, and your own biblical interpretations and theology, then you can run into problems.

We often want to see the world in black and white. We want simple solutions to complex problems. We want a candidate to tell us in two minutes or less how they would solve the Social Security problem; how they would deal with the environment; how they are going to handle immigration reform; what they are going to do to make our nation more secure; how to provide health care for everyone who needs it.

But do we really think any candidate can effectively answer any of those questions in two minutes or less? Actually, we don't even want two-minute answers! We want 30 or 60 second sound bites that we can fit in between sporting event breaks or sitcom commercials to solve complex problems! That is just dangerous. There are many people willing to give us 60 second answers and some of us gravitate towards those black-and-white solutions.

Part of this entire message series is aimed at helping us see the nuances between the black and the white--to encourage us to look for answers on both sides of the issues and to realize that the truth is not found simply on one side or the other, but often somewhere in between. But we have this idea that we want simple answers and we tend to oversimplify. People of faith do this often.

In one of the early Republican debates that was broadcast on YouTube, a question was asked that captured the oversimplification that happens. A man named Joseph held up his Bible and asked the candidates, "Do you believe in this book?"

But here's a bigger question for you Joseph. "Is that really all we need to know to decide if we're going to support a candidate for the president of the United States? If you just believe the Bible literally, that's all I need to know." That's not all you need to know. Even when it comes to biblical interpretation there are lots of places where it is gray. There are many places where we have to understand nuance and the complex ways people thought in the past and how we apply that to the present.

I want us to be people of faith who recognize that complexity; who don't look for simple answers to the complex problems of our world. I hope we're willing to do some thinking about the issues.

Let's look at it this way: Take a look at this photograph. **[Black and white sunflowers]** You may have seen something like this driving through Kansas. There is no color or gray in this picture. It is just black and white. But let's add a little gray to it. **[Black and white sunflowers in grayscale]** We can start to differentiate the flowers and see what they really are. It begins to convey the true picture because we see the shades of gray and not just black and white. We also recognize that the world is not just shades of gray but a multitude of colors. **[sunflowers in color]** We can really begin to see the beauty as we add those colors.

That's what I want to encourage us to do in this message series. Yes, there are things in black and white and so we see them in black-and-white. But there are so many things that require a willingness to recognize the complexity and the nuances in between the black and white that are shades of gray and brilliant colors. There have to be people of faith who look at the questions in the complex issues from this perspective.

There is one last dangerous mistake that can be made with relationship to faith and politics. **“Separating Politics from Faith”** We can say, "You know what? There really is no connection here between faith and politics. My faith is about how I love the Lord and my relationship with him and going to church and doing Bible study. All of that is my faith over here on one side. Then my politics and everyday world are over here and the other side and I keep them completely separate."

The Bible is very clear that this does not work in God's eyes. Throughout the Prophets in the Old Testament, God continually addresses this. The people thought they were doing God's will when they were keeping their religion private and not bringing it into the public arena. And God says, "This is unacceptable."

One example of this is in Isaiah 58. The people were faithfully worshiping God and they were studying the Scriptures that were available to them in that day. They were praying and fasting and yet God says this: **“They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me. ‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren’t you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don’t even notice it!’ ‘I will tell you why!’ I respond. ‘It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers... No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help...Then when you call, the Lord will answer. “Yes, I am here,” he will quickly reply”** (Isaiah 58:2-9).

If politics is the process of determining who gets what, when and how, God has very strong feelings about these things. God says to us that we dare not divorce our faith from how we live out our lives in the daily world which includes our politics.

This leads us to consider the **politics of Jesus**.

A lot of us grew up thinking that Jesus was apolitical. We might think, “Jesus is our personal savior. He's not involved in politics and he doesn't have anything to say about politics.” But that's simply not true; Jesus was involved in the politics of his day.

There were political parties in the holy land in the time of Jesus. There were the Sadducees, and the Pharisees, and the Essenes, and the Zealots. These are the political parties of Jesus' day who had power and controlled who got what, when and how—when the Romans weren't controlling it. Jesus had **a lot** to say to these folks! Some of it pretty harsh!

When Jesus went about his public ministry he devoted most of his time to healing the sick. This was a political act. He was saying that God cares about people who are sick. One night he stayed up all night long healing the sick. What does that tell us about God's concern for people who are sick? What might that tell us about the health care crisis?

It doesn't give us the answer, but it tells us that God cares about this issue. God is concerned about the fact that there are children who do not have insurance and their moms and dads are afraid to take him to the doctor because they don't have the \$50 or \$100 to pay the doctor. The Scriptures and Jesus' ministry don't tell us how to solve the problem, but they do say, "God cares about this issue and you should also." Our answer must somehow be consistent with what Jesus did for those who are sick.

In fact, do you know who started most of the hospitals in this country? It was church people. Churches started hospitals, primarily for the poor, because they believed that part of the ethic of Jesus and the kingdom of God was to heal the sick.

Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats. He said that on the last day those who will be consigned to hell are those who saw the hungry, and the naked, and the thirsty, and the sick, and those in prison, and they did nothing; those who saw the stranger and did not invite them in. Jesus is making a very powerful political point that we have to pay attention to. But again, Jesus does not give us all the answers about how to care for those who are poor, or for immigrants, but he is telling us that we have to care and be willing to do something if we are to be citizens of the kingdom of God.

Jesus gave other parables like the parable of the talents. In this parable the servants are each entrusted with something and they are to take care of it while the Master is away. Does that say anything to us about stewardship of the environment? Do you think this says anything about taking care of the earth that God has entrusted to us?

When it comes to how America conducts itself internationally, does this statement from Jesus mean anything? "If any among you would be great then you must become a servant." Does that say anything to us about our relationship to other nations? It all had to do with who gets what, when and how. Jesus was involved. We are called to have both, a personal relationship with Jesus where we experience his love, and his forgiveness and know him as Savior. But we also have to know that he has saved us for a mission, to be there and speak up for the least, the last, and the lost. We love God with all our heart **AND** we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Let me repeat something I said at the beginning of the message. **Our country and our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience to get involved in the political process.** If we don't get involved, then I don't think we have much of a future in our country. So let me challenge you in a couple of ways as we wrap this up. **"Integrating Your Faith with Your Politics"**

First, **I want to challenge you to register to vote.** You have a responsibility and opportunity to bring your faith as you participate in our political process. Are you registered to vote? If you are not, then you can register online or at the Department of Motor Vehicles. The deadline to register is October 8.

Are you becoming informed about the key issues? If a reporter were to ask you today, "What are the four or five most important issues facing our country today?" Would you have a good answer to that? If you know what those issues are for you, then have you explored what the possible solutions might be? Solutions that are most in keeping with the kingdom of God and the reign of Jesus Christ? Have you looked at what people believe on each side of those issues? Have you come to some preliminary conclusion yourself? If you have not taken the time to look at those things I hope you will in the days ahead.

Do you know who the candidates are who are running for office? Do you know anything about them other than what they look like? Have you actually examined their beliefs and their positions on the key issues? Watch the debates, get online and watch the interviews Rick Warren did with both McCain and Obama. Take the time to get to know who these candidates are and what they stand for, and not just because they're in the political party in which your parents raised you.

And then **take seriously the opportunity to put your faith in politics together by voting.** The general election is on the first Tuesday in November, the 4th. Put it on your calendar. Let me be clear that I am not concerned about who you vote for or how you vote. I just want you who are people of faith, who can see the complexities and nuances in life, to be involved as thoughtful Christian people.

One more time. "All that is required for evil to prevail is for good [people] to do nothing." And "Our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of moral courage and conviction, people of conscience, to get involved in the political process." That is the connection between faith and politics. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his book and sermon series on this topic.