

Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
August 19, 2012

## DO NOT BE FOOLISH: ON CREATING THE COMMON GOOD

~Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise...these are desperate times  
~ Ephesians 5:15-16  
(NRSV/The Message)

The fog had cleared; the sun was bright near the end of a long run. The legs are weary which sometimes means you don't pick up your feet as spritely. My right foot caught the top of a small rock in the dirt, and in what seems like slow motion, I'm suddenly airborne and there is nothing I can do about it. By that time, I had worked up a reasonable sweat, which meant that my arms bracing the landing were covered in dirt as well as the right side of my body. A little stunned and embarrassed, I recovered, stood up and looked around to see who may have witnessed the fall. Birds and squirrels maybe. Ironically, the song on the I-Pod at the moment was Superwoman by Alicia Keyes. Not so much I thought, but I slowly continued on, assured that soon I'd be at a restroom where I could wash off the layer of dirt.

If only it were so easy to wash off the proverbial dirt accumulating at this time in the thickening home stretch of an election year. With every newscast, blog, headline, or Facebook post I voluntarily watch or read or am subjected to I start to feel like I need a shower.

For review purposes, it is intentional that this 3-week sermon series called "Faithful Citizenship as Spiritual Practice" was indeed my idea. There have been a few moments of late that I have said to myself: "what was I thinking?" How about just talking about sports or the weather? But here there are serious ever-present issues like systematic substance abuse and catastrophic climate change even in these seemingly benign, safe topics. There is no escape, really.

But religion and politics? Never the two shall meet some contend. It's one combo most are counseled to avoid at any dinner table or restaurant. In a recent poll, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that with the 2012 election now only months away, congregations are getting the message that 54% of Americans want to keep places of worship out of

politics. But this doesn't mean the public wants an entirely secularized public square. "When people say they want religious organizations out of politics, they mean religious organizations telling people who to vote for," said Gordon Whitman, director of public policy for PICO, a network of 1,000 faith based organizations. While there seems to be consensus that religious values should inform positions on issues, it should be noted that religious involvement in partisan politics is driving Americans, especially those under the age of 35, away from organized religion. This drift, documented in a 2012 Millennial Values Survey (millennial is the term that refers to this under 35 age group and one with whom I spend a good deal of time with in my role on campus) is a factor that makes nonpartisanship a necessity for religious communities to thrive. "The last generation of Christians saw (the two major political parties) as strategic allies in pushing their agendas," said Jonathan Merritt, the 29 year old author of "A Faith

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of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars.” “The next generation is reconsidering how that has blinded us and harmed us.”<sup>1</sup>

My hope and intention is that these few Sundays will be a conversation of sorts. You are an informed crowd and I suspect you would agree that these are very serious times for many reasons, and serious times need serious people willing to call upon our best selves, our whole selves, which for many of us this morning if not most of us, means unpacking and discerning what faith or spiritual practice has to do with citizenship at all. What are we really talking about?

To remind us again from the Ephesians text that Richard read for us and I paraphrase: “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise; these are desperate times.” “Do not be foolish, do not live unthinkingly, but seek to understand what God desires.” This does not invite us to be smug, because not only are we imperfect as human beings, so are our communities, and so is our faith however we define or practice it.

I commend to you the work of Stephen L. Carter, prolific writer Stanford graduate '76, and currently Professor of Law at Yale University. In his book, *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*, which offers insights from history, theology, politics, philosophy and law, Carter argues two interrelated theses. First, that there is nothing wrong with the robust participation of the nation's many religious voices in debates over matters of public moment. Second, that religions – although not democracy – will almost always lose their best, most spiritual selves when they choose to be involved in the partisan, electoral side of American politics. His inspiration to write this book came from both his love of God and country and a fear that millions of Americans across the religious and political spectrum have lost sight of the proper relationship between religion and politics. Writes Carter: “On one side are those who treat the merest (notion) of religion in our public and political life as an offense to the American idea. On the other are those who believe it to be the responsibility of government to use its power to enforce as law the moral truths of their religion. The tension between these two wrong ideas is ruining our democracy, and threatens to ruin many of our religious traditions as well.”<sup>2</sup>

Suffice it to say, I wade into these waters of religion and politics in this series not to condemn or buttress. Not to pick on or persuade. The choices are to remain silent or reflect partisanship. The responsibility of this pulpit permits me to do neither. But it does require me to acknowledge how deeply complex this relationship between religion and politics is. Words I've used and others have used to describe this dilemma are profoundly true: corrosive, ambiguous, divisive, antagonistic, self-serving and diminishing. It is a domain that needs serious critique. There are risks and limits to political involvement without a doubt. Nevertheless, for all of its abuse and imperfection, it is the religious voice, at its best, as Carter and others would contend and with whom I agree, that is still a

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<sup>1</sup> Religion News Service; Pulpits Tread Lightly on Politics, May 25, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen L. Carter; *God's Name In Vain* (Basic Books, NY, 2000) 1.

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remaining force that can call us to something higher and better than thinking constantly about our own

selves, our own wants, our own needs. It can still, and now more than ever, must be a force for good. How that is achieved is not so straightforward.

For example, the prophets of religious and biblical traditions, including Jesus himself, have often been described as subversive. Subversive of the culture itself. And this is where it gets difficult and dangerous. As one writer put it: "Some people counsel the safety of silence when it comes to politics, but you never make that case from the narratives of Scripture....God's revelation demonstrates that God cares deeply about and somehow interacts with human politics and governments...In the Christian Scriptures we encounter Jesus announcement of an alternate reign that is fraught with inherently political consequences. Jesus renounced violence and blessed peacemakers, favored poor people and warned the rich, embraced ethnic outsiders and infuriated smug insiders. Told us to love our enemies rather than to kill them, partied with moral failures and flaunted religious conventions."<sup>3</sup>

If that isn't a call to faithful citizenship or resistance to irrelevance in the public square than I'm not sure what is. These examples and the narratives of our holy texts this morning remind us to consider and reconsider what remains extraordinarily vexing and which 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr described as "stuck between the lust for power and the call of virtue." In the letter to the Ephesians this morning the point of not being foolish and yearning for wisdom is to risk missing the ultimate call to choose the path of work in God's creation rather than standing back or disengaging altogether. To engage with our culture is to strike an awkward balance, an informed integration without losing our best selves in the process. The illustration from the gospel of John I suggest is to remind us that this bread and this cup offered today is a symbolic invitation to partake in the embodied life of God - a consumption that gives life and remember what we must not forget - God is present and yet with us. God has not gone off on vacation or lost interest in us or in creation. When we

eat and drink at this Holy Table we are reminded that we are joined collectively with the living God and as our post Communion prayer reminds us, we cannot remain the same. And yes, this does indeed hold us to a higher standard. The reality is the struggle about who defines that standard. Whose prerogative is it and how is it measured? This consumption that gives life is not fulfilled by earthly measures of more, such as more time, more money, more goods, more power but rather by the quality of existence. How shall we define that existence not only for ourselves, but also for all people, for every citizen of this nation? Can we still find and create the common good, elusive as that may be?

I believe we can and we must. It will take hard work, it will be messy, and yes, we will get dirty but lets contribute to that idea differently, beyond and above the shrill cacophony of blame, hypocrisy and fear. Faithful citizenship may mean

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Clendenin in Journey with Jesus, a weekly webzine for the global church.

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rethinking what we have always thought in hopes of discerning the best of our selves and of our religious traditions. It may be our feeble, humble, but imperative attempt to translate what God meant when pointing to the reign or the existence God envisioned for all humankind. It will mean a willingness to ask hard questions, to compromise where we can, to change our minds where we ought and truly make a commitment to another elusive reality: humility and reconciliation. It may not seem possible to some, maybe most, or even probable at this moment, to engage in the public square, in politics in no other fashion but as adversaries, angry or frightened partisans. But if any one of us is willing to at least stop for a moment to consider whether or not we truly want to take seriously, to reconsider and deeply engage the teachings of our religious traditions and pull together not apart, we have the extraordinary opportunity to model civil discourse and provide virtuous citizenship that can take us to a new and transformed place. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain suggests this is possible - for Judaism, Christianity and Islam in particular to be faithful to our own traditions, yet a blessing to the entire world. This indeed stands as our highest challenge. My favorite poet Mary

Oliver reminds me, in light of this daunting notion to “keep room in your heart for the unimaginable.” I’m still working on that.

And so, dear people, consider this not a conclusion, but a pause, as we listen, think, pray, sing and break life-giving bread together today and in these next weeks.

I’ll leave you with this – to pause and to ponder as we face together a formidable task. In his helpful writing called *Faithful Citizenship: Christianity and Politics for the 21st Century*, Greg Garrett suggested:

We might emulate a woman who combined a deep religious commitment with a political acumen, Sojourner Truth, the American slave who walked away from bondage and into prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolition movement. Although we now all agree that slavery was a reprehensible human evil, not all thought so then. Nonetheless, Sojourner Truth’s rhetoric was engaging, not merely oppositional. Her most famous speech asked a simple question: Ain’t I a woman? Instead of demanding agreement on the issues, she stood in front of her audience, told them about her life, and asked them to judge. She thanked them for hearing her, and on another occasion stood up and said, “Children I have come here like the rest of you to hear what it is I have to say.” While no one accused her of not holding a strong personal sense of what was right and what was wrong, Sojourner Truth didn’t shout down her opponents; she engaged them.

Those who hate and those who belittle, those who push and those who shove, those who shout and those who shout back, all those who insist on their

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rightness – and me, insisting on my rightness: All of us still have a chance to gather at the river.<sup>4</sup>

We can wash off the dirt there.

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<sup>4</sup> Greg Garrett, *Faithful Citizenship, Christianity and Politics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Patheos Press: Englewood, CO)