

Jingoism, Justice, and Jesus

Luke 4:14-21

As you well know, in another week or so, we will enter the proverbial Twilight Zone with the Iowa Caucuses, followed by the first of the political primaries in New Hampshire. Since campaigning has been ongoing since the last election, it's hard to imagine that we are actually within spitting distance of knowing who will represent each party in the general election. And since we have a pretty good idea of who those candidates might be, we can well imagine there will be a lot of spit flying through the air!

Every time we go through this, I'm never certain whether or not we should look forward to an election cycle. It usually isn't the most pleasant or civil of times, or the most hopeful, for that matter. All that's wrong with the country is magnified and that which is good either gets dismissed altogether or is recast as alarmingly awful. Politics, it would seem, is the business of malcontents.

Of course, we should remember the period for political primaries always coincides with the season of Lent, which seems appropriate when you consider the weeks prior to Easter are meant to be a time of self-flagellation and remorsefulness for one's sinful ways. It fits. As with Lent, the political season never unfolds without someone getting crucified along the way which doesn't portend the end, for eternal hope is resurrected by the prospects of yet another Presidential election campaign (which begins around this time next year. Hallelujah!).

That said, I've been intrigued this time around. With all the evidence that organized religion is in decline throughout American society, I've been reassured it still plays a significant role in Presidential elections, particularly in certain regions of the country. The name of Jesus has been

invoked more in political rallies over the past few months than you'd hear at a Texas football game. Some have even been known to quote chapter and verse from the Bible, as if they were reciting soundbytes from God, turning their podiums into pulpits and their speeches into sermons. Every week, it's not unusual to see politicians gather with religious leaders of one type or another in houses of worship, hoping for endorsement by association (e.g., Republicans typically buddy-up with Christian Evangelicals and Democrats with African-American and Jewish religious leaders)—all with the intent of picking up a block of motivated voters who will go the extra mile to ensure victory, as if God prefers certain parties, platforms, and even candidates over others. The power of the pulpit in politics still holds some sway.

For some, this is politics as usual; for others, it is rather alarming, especially when religious leaders endorse a particular candidate of either party or use politics to push a religious agenda (or vice versa), or when a politician invokes the name of Jesus or quotes the Apostle Paul, oblivious to the fact that not everyone in this country reads the New Testament.

For me, what's troubling about this mix of religion and politics is that it has gotten rather jingoistic in its spirit—presumptuously assuming that the United States is an inherently Christian country, from its founding to the present. In spite of the Founders' great caution and effort to avoid the establishment of an official religion, there are those who openly advocate for our country to be recognized as a Christian nation in their standard opposition to secularization and pluralism, but even more nefariously as a platform to rally patriots to defend the country from foreign influences (read that as Islam or immigrants in general—a demonizing tactic that was used in our nation's darker and shameful moments against Catholics,

communists, Japanese, Jews, and the like). It simply amazes me how much of the populace accepts this notion uncritically. What we have in the drama of our current Presidential election is a divisive spirit that normally resides along the margins, but now has become mainstream, pitting citizen against citizen and religion against religion and race against race. Is it being alarmist to recognize the historic precedents, both in our own country and around the globe, when racial identity or religious orthodoxy of a particular type has been wedded with the fervor of nationalism? Jingoism is jingoism—call it like it is.

I don't throw this term around lightly. The dictionary definition of jingoism is "extreme chauvinism or nationalism marked especially by a belligerent foreign policy," which plays out in a number of ways when people assume that their beliefs, their culture, their race, and their nation are superior to all others and will support (if not rally around) aggressive acts directed toward foreigners. Currently, this is politically invigorating to a significant segment of the voters and entertaining to many others. But if you extrapolate it out to its logical impact and effect, jingoism for any reason is destructive, if not disastrous, to a country—especially a pluralistic one like ours populated by immigrants. If this is the new face of politics in this country, dismantling the social progress of the past century, then we may well find that the rest of the world no longer views America as a land of freedom and opportunity, but instead as a place of militant paranoia.

To be fair, jingoism is not a recent phenomenon; in fact, it is one of the oldest characteristics of tribes, nations and imperial states. It is a perceived racial, ethnic, social, economic, and religious superiority rooted in tribal identities, wherever and whatever they may be. Interestingly, the Bible reflects this in the conflict between tribes and conquest of land, but

even with Israel perceiving itself as exceptionally chosen as a people and beloved above all others. Religion and power often go hand in hand whenever people live in fear, or as the prophets so often noted, when they need to justify their own injustices.

I suppose that's why I'm particularly struck by the character and message of Jesus, because he lived at a time when Israel was largely vulnerable to this type of jingoism, as they were controlled by the imperial rule of Rome—lacking freedom, self-determination, and collective justice, at least as their religious life defined it in the Torah, the law of Moses. When he came of age, Jesus could have easily followed the path of other messianic figures before him, rallying supporters to follow him on the path of political insurrection—taking on the powers that be in the Herodian kings and the Roman centurion armies that patrolled and controlled the entire region for the Caesars. Had he done so, he would have crusaded in the same violent way, since politics, in that setting, were decided not at the ballot box, but in the business end of a sword or spear.

If he had chosen to go that way, Jesus may have been declared a noble hero—a political leader willing to stand up and sacrifice his own life for the freedom of his people. He would have launched his campaign reciting the great nationalistic texts of Israel:

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Dt. 6:4, 5)

Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. (Josh. 1:9)

O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve! O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? (Ps. 94:1-3)

Jesus could have stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and proclaimed such words, which would have inspired the crowds and raised the patriotic pride of his people, launching his campaign to save the nation—all of it based on religious hopes and dreams. He could have drawn the line in the sand in that moment defining once and for all his messianic ambitions to restore Israel to greatness. That would have been stirring and very popular—a real crowd-pleaser—certainly more than how he eventually interpreted the text he chose to read from Isaiah 61:

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.

What's striking about this choice of text is that it could be received like jingoistic rhetoric if the oppressed were interpreted as Israel, as a whole—much like Isaiah was usually read. However, it was far from that, for what Isaiah and Jesus were referencing was Leviticus 25 and the proclamation of the year of Jubilee. It was not a tribal chant, but a built-in protection in the Torah to prevent Israel itself from instituting generational poverty and the concentration of wealth and social injustice against its most vulnerable!

First, take a look sometime at what the Jubilee year was in Leviticus 25. Every fifty years, much like returning everything to a default setting, all debts were canceled, land was returned to its original owners, and the advantages that some had over others were reversed, i.e., the last became first and the first became last. It was returning the land, which was the source of wealth, to its original occupants. Second, look where Jesus maintained his focus—not in some jingoistic campaign against foreigners, but in defending and offering hope to the “least of these”—the most vulnerable within Israel itself—as well as reaching out in mercy to non-

Jews. His was a campaign of transforming the social and political culture of his own people from injustice to justice.

Not surprisingly, even though it was a biblical mandate, Israel never once followed this corrective program or its intent. The Jubilee was a dream left unfulfilled. There is no record of it ever occurring at any point in history.

But then, should this surprise us? Even in the simplest of settings, it's a monumental challenge, because it requires those who have acquired all the power, influence, wealth, and resources to voluntarily relinquish them—something that runs against the selfish nature within most people. Yet, this was the basis for Jesus' gospel proclamation: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Inferring from what he said and did throughout his ministry, this is what Jesus believed divine redemption was for—to undo the injustices within Israel that were deeply embedded and ingrained within their society. His was not a patriotic, jingoistic message to rally his people to rise up against the Romans or defend themselves from foreign powers or threats; it wasn't a message of deliverance that primarily served to benefit the heavily-taxed, but still wealthy Judean merchants or landowners or social elites. It wasn't a Pharisaical spiritualizing of righteousness and justice under the banner of "private morality," which tolerated social injustices and made religious hypocrisy commonplace.

Jesus' message and ministry spoke to heart of the problem: Israel would never be redeemed to greatness or serve as an exceptional, shining beacon to all the nations as long as they failed to treat their own people with justice, mercy, equity, and fairness. We can study the gospels and story after story has Jesus addressing a social injustice and righting a wrong for

the most vulnerable people in his land, or he challenged and then helped transform the lives of those who were living well at the expense of others. Social transformation was redemption (personal transformation often occurred as well). Using the Torah's own remedy for redemption, Jesus launched his ministry in the spirit of Jubilee. Without getting their own house in order first, the people of Israel weren't exceptional; they were just as corrupt, evil, and godforsaken as any other tribe, nation, or power on earth. They themselves made Israel "unchosen."

Honestly, it doesn't take a preacher to draw the parallels to our own country and time. The way religion and politics mix in this country and in our campaigns, this redemptive message delivers an indictment upon us as well as a vision for hope. We're greatly mistaken if Americans believe the greatness of our country is reflected only in the military power we can boast, or the extreme wealth that some can attain, or in the political system we have that allows for a transition of government by ballot and not by the bullet. The greatness of this country is illustrated in how fair and honest the entire system is for all citizens, and how just, merciful, and generous we will be as people.

I preach from a single pulpit on a day that few will listen. I recognize that. However, in the beginning of 2016, every one of us can recognize how much the land we love is looking more and more like an underdeveloped country, with huge gaps in wealth and opportunity and with martial law patrolling too many of our streets. This isn't what our Founders envisioned when they wrote the Constitution to guarantee and protect freedom. They presumed a just country will be defended by its people, but an unjust one will fall into destructive ruin.

The political answer today is not to govern with the interests of the most powerful at heart, but those who are oppressed by the hardships they face and who look for leaders to inspire them to find their hope in life. This election should seek leaders from both parties (or outside of the parties!) who will reflect our better character, not our meanest spirit. Instead of jingoism, we need justice to rally around and cooperation to unite our people. It's our best chance for redemption.

As Christians, our call isn't to endorse a broken and corrupt system for the sake of popularity and power; it is to strive for justice and reignite the hope for Jubilee. If we do that, then, we would be like Jesus.

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