

HILLARY, BARACK, AND JEREMIAH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

April 6, 2008

Scripture: Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Acts 2:14a, 36-47

Let's be clear. This is not a political sermon. It's a sermon about the church; about pastors and congregations, and communities of faith and what it is that binds our hearts together in Christian unity.

I have no advice to you about how to vote in the coming election. That is not my business as your pastor. My business is to be persistent with the good news of Jesus Christ in and out of season, to speak prophetically at times in the tradition of the prophets when I see the nation or the world or the church falling under the judgment of God; and to be a pastor to this flock, to tend to the brokenhearted, to offer words and deeds of healing and comfort to those in need.

The IRS does not allow pastors to speak politically from the pulpit, or to endorse candidates, and woe to any preacher who brings the IRS into the church. So let's be clear. This is not a political sermon. It's a sermon about the church; about pastors and congregations, and communities of faith and what it is that binds our hearts together in Christian unity.

There are important issues that should be of significant concern to us as a nation in this election year, issues that should be the focus of much soul searching: war and peace, taxes and immigration, the economy and unemployment, healthcare and the environment, the torture of captives and extraordinary rendition, peace in the Middle East and the easing of Palestinian and Israeli tensions, terrorism, the plight of our cities, poverty and hunger, housing, Darfur, and education... to name but a few. There are a lot of important issues we *should* be discussing in this political season.

Which is why it so disappointing that we are instead talking about preachers and congregations and when to leave a church because the preaching there is troublesome to those who are not its members. For weeks now the nation has been focused on Senator Obama's membership at the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, an eight thousand member congregation in the heart of Chicago's South Side, and in particular the preaching of its recently retired pastor, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, Jr.

The press has relished lifting out of context Dr. Wright's Afro-centric message, his blunt and forceful critique of American society, his analysis of white power, and his rage at racism, as well as the spiritual struggle of a community of people that still bears the legacy of slavery.

I do not know Dr. Wright, personally, but I have read some of his sermons, and I know that when preachers list the great preachers of our time, Dr. Wright is always among them. He enjoyed until recently a distinguished reputation as a preacher and pastor and prophet, and deservedly so. He speaks from a Liberation Theological perspective, one strongly aware of power in relationships, and understands that God takes the side of the oppressed in struggles of power, as God chose an enslaved Israel and made it a light among the nations, a chosen people, a royal priesthood. That Liberation Theology arose first in Latin America, but has also found a voice among many oppressed

groups, in Feminist and Womanist theology, in Gay Liberation theology, and especially in some corners of African American church life.

Recently, my colleague John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and a friend of Dr. Wright's, said something with which I strongly agree,

I wish he had made his point without saying "God damn America, but not for a moment do I wish he had been less prophetic. In fact, the great biblical prophets did and said outrageous and controversial things, which consistently got them in trouble and occasionally in jail... I wish Jeremiah Wright had not said "The chickens are coming home to roost" about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, even though he was referring to a speech made by Edward Peck, former Ambassador to Iraq and President Reagan's Terrorism Task Force Deputy Director. Wright was paraphrasing Ambassador Peck, who went on to list America's foreign and domestic policy decisions that had put the nation in peril. I wish he hadn't suggested that the government were responsible for AIDS. But then again, the government never deliberately and misleadingly left untreated members of my race who had late stage syphilis simply so it could document the disease's deadly toll.¹

I am quite disturbed that the press has taken snippets of thirty six years of preaching and condensed it, out of context, into sound bites for YouTube, or a grainy replay on CNN. I would warn you that if any of you are running for office, I could be equally edited, dissected, and dissembled by the press, hungry to reduce a person's ministry, thought, and work into a ten second sound bite. So be warned! I am not in any way a successor to the firebrand eloquence of Harry Emerson Fosdick, but this pulpit has been quoted before in national controversy, and I am sure that there is enough that I have already said here previously, that what has happened to Dr. Wright, could happen to me.

The Rev Gay Byron, a faculty member at Colgate Rochester Divinity School rightly deplores this hatchet job by the press when she wrote in the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* newspaper,

Unfortunately, the media have not entered the doors of Trinity for the purpose of salvation, hope, social uplift, or a prophetic word from the Lord, but rather through the doors of cryptic sound bites that depict Wright's sermons as "hate speech," "divisive," "incendiary," "inflammatory."

Underlying the press coverage is something that I find particularly disturbing. And it has to do with the assumptions being expressed about what it is to be a member of a congregation, and the relationship that one has with a pastor when you chose to be a member of a church. Senator Obama was criticized for not leaving Trinity because his pastor said things with which the Senator took exception, things that the American public found offensive.

Mrs. Clinton said, "Given all that we have heard and seen, he would not have been my pastor." She went on to say that "While we don't have a choice when it comes to our relatives, we do have a choice when it comes to our pastors or our church." And of

course, she's right. At the outset you find a congregation that you believe nurtures and strengthens your faith, a community of believers to which you feel called, welcomed, and at home, and you seek pastoral leadership that provides a vision for that community and that articulates the faith well.

I am sadly disappointed that Senator Clinton suggested that she would have withdrawn her membership if Rev. Wright had been her pastor. She was saying that if you disagree with the pastor's preaching in the context of worship a word that he or she believes is what God has given them to say, the only alternative to embracing and approving that preaching would be to withdraw your membership. As if the pastor were all there were to a church, as if there was no way to engage in discussion with your pastor about his or her beliefs, and challenge him or her with your reading of the texts, and your understanding of the issues.

Mr. Obama said in return that he could no more disown his pastor than he could disown his white grandmother. He distanced himself from the preaching of Dr. Wright, and removed Dr. Wright as an advisor from his staff. But he did not remove his church membership from Trinity, a membership of over 20 years standing. A church in which he was baptized, in which he and his wife were married, and to which he has contributed generously.

He disagreed with his pastor but he did not move his membership, because clearly, for Senator Obama, church membership is more than loyalty to an individual pastor. It is commitment to a congregation and to the Christian life lived out in community. And Sen. Obama *gets it*. He understands what it is to be a member of a church.

The text we read for today, that picture of the early church that is sketched in the book of Acts, describes a community of the faithful that received the good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus gladly.

Their pastor was a good preacher, the apostle Peter. The text tells us that that one sermon that he preached in Jerusalem won three thousand converts. Why even Billy Graham would have found that a good day's work.

But the description of the life of the congregation that Luke offers us is equally remarkable, one to which every congregation ever since has strived. Luke says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."² It was a church of powerful preaching, yes, but also a church in which there was study, and fellowship, and prayer, and the celebration of the sacraments. There was mission and service to others as the church reached out to widows and the poor, to the sick and to those to whom Jesus had offered hope.

Nobody left because they didn't like what Peter had to say. Though they must have wondered about some of his teaching, which was also Jesus' teaching... turn the other cheek, pray for your enemies, when being mugged give not only your coat but your shirt as well, do not make a show of giving alms, welcome the Gentile, the outcast, the Samaritan, the Centurion, the child. Go and sell all that you have and then come, take up your cross, and follow me. It was a message that was at first heard as revolutionary, outrageous, irreverent, not the stock sermon of the synagogue.

Whatever of Peter's message that was troublesome for his first hearers was offset by what those first Christians experienced in the community of faith and the family of affection in which they found themselves, for they created a church in which everyone was welcome and all were nurtured.

That is what a church is supposed to be, a mutually supportive community of caring and affection, in which even the oddballs, the strange ones, the different and downcast and even the delusional can find a place of belonging. A church is more than a pastor, it is a community of faith bound together in Christian love.

Katharine Moon, a professor of political science at Wellesley, a Korean American, describes this kind of church out of the experience of the immigrant congregation.

Churches, synagogues, mosques, prayer meetings are... communities of mutual help, support and practical guidance. As social scientists know, they are instrumental to building and maintaining social capital. For new immigrants, as well as racial and ethnic minorities, they serve a particular purpose. Often, the immigrant or ethnic church is the one public place where a common language, food, and humor particular to one's cultural heritage can be shared... It is through the congregation that we ask for help – to look after our children or elderly parents... Often it is the people in the worship hall who... help us paint our houses and visit us in the hospitals... A house of worship is much more than a pastor.³

One person may be attracted to the preaching of one or more of the pastors, another to the fact that there are women in ministry who are serving in the church, another may be awed by the choir, or inspired by the stained glass windows, or captivated by the history of a congregation. Another may simply feel that the formality of the worship provides order and resonance to their otherwise chaotic life. Still others come because the bible study brings faith alive for them. And others discover there a community of love and affection that is the touchstone at the core of their life.

No one stays, really stays in a church, unless they find there a community of people who become friends, who share in life and common values, whose children are a gift in which all are blessed, a church where one can grow in faith and be sustained in all the seasons of life.

In every church I have served there have been members who have been faithful congregants and active participants in the formation of a community of believers who through the years have shared in one another's lives. They weep at one another's sorrows, and rejoice in one another's rejoicing. Older members become surrogate grandparents to other's children who have no grandparents nearby. Those who have no children teach church school and thereby gain a family in which they share. The church's family becomes our own family.

A church is a place where people look around and remember the day they were married, or recall a mother's funeral, or remember the year their kids were in the Christmas pageant when the kid playing the angel Gabriel had a diabetic attack and they had to stop the pageant and go and get him some orange juice and a candy bar. It is the

place where the person who feels outcast is welcomed in, and who they are is celebrated, not hidden.

That's what the church is about. It's about volunteering at the Tartan Fair, and working on the Habitat project, and going on a mission trip to the Katrina-damaged Gulf coast; it's chatting at the coffee hour with someone you never see except here, but whom you always look forward to seeing.

It's not about the preacher. It's about Jesus. It's about God. It's about being a part of a community in whom the love and light of Christ shines so brightly that all our lives are illuminated by that sun glowing brilliantly in our midst, when he is here. And for most of you, he *is* here, in large part found in the community of friends and others in the church who bear his name, Christian.

There is a recurring nightmare that every preacher has at some point in his or her life. Someone comes and tells you after a service that the sermon has changed his life. He is going to leave Wall Street and a six figure income and take the gospel to the poor and dispossessed in Haiti. And he thanks you profusely while pumping your hand and telling you that it's all because of what you said in your sermon today.

And all the time you're standing there and thinking of this poor guy's wife and three dependent children and what in the world you said that might have caused this reaction, and trying to take none of the blame by saying, "*It was only a sermon.*"

Well, I guess for once, I am surprised and maybe happy that a preacher's preaching got noticed, even if it is not exactly the excerpt from thirty six years of service that sum up a faithful ministry.

Having said that, I think it only right that if a man or woman is going to preach they have to be held to account for the gospel they hold forth. There is a Protestant tradition of a free and open pulpit in which a pastor's right to preach the gospel as he or she humbly perceives God has given them understanding is a right that should be fiercely protected, and always has been in Presbyterian circles. It preserves the right and the responsibility of the preacher to preach prophetically, to speak as God gives discernment and allows that speech without fear of fetter or muzzle.

The congregation may disagree with the preacher's understanding, they may be angered, enraged, even infuriated. But there is at the same time always the recognition in our tradition that the preacher has the right to speak freely the Word of God that he or she discerns God has given them.

I wish Sen. Clinton and Sen. Obama had defended that right of a free pulpit. It is not only a religious right, it is also a Constitutional right. I wish they had said that while they disagreed, and distanced themselves from Dr. Wright's preaching, they defended his right both as a preacher and as a citizen to speak his mind freely. That every pulpit should be protected as free.

I wish they had said that. I wish somebody had said that, in all this public discussion about voting with your feet, and leaving churches, and turning your back on your congregation. I wish somebody had said that.

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¹ John Buchanan, “On Jeremiah Wright”, a statement during morning worship
Sunday March 30, 2008

² Acts 2:42

³ Katharine Moon, Chicago Tribune, March 25, 2008, editorial.