

Sermon Title: Mystery, Power, and Suffering  
Text: Ephesians 3:1-21

August 6, 2006  
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI  
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Several of you in the past week pointed me toward an article that appeared on the front page of last Sunday's *New York Times*, under the headline, "Conservative Evangelical Pastor Steers Clear of Politics, and Pays." The article tells the story of the Rev. Gregory Boyd, the pastor of a large church in Maplewood, Minnesota. As the headline indicates, this church bears the label of "conservative" and "evangelical", and in the midst of the 2004 election cycle, Pastor Boyd preached a series of sermons on the relationship between "the kingdom of God" and "the kingdom of this world." The conclusion of that series, as reported by the *Times*, was that "the church should steer clear of politics, give up moralizing on sexual issues, stop claiming the United States is a 'Christian nation' and stop glorifying American military campaigns."<sup>1</sup> The article goes on to say that the congregation lost about 20% of its membership as a result of this series of sermons.

I'll admit to a tiny cheer as I read the rest of the story, but that sentence bothered me. I was reminded of a conversation we had some years back in the parlor with Father Glen Gessner, who works among the poorest people of Nicaragua. One of the things he said that stuck in my mind is that you can't step out of your house in the morning without being political. Waving at your neighbor, sorting through your mail, deciding which television shows you're going to watch are all *political* decisions. The question, according to Father Glenn, was not *if* the church should be involved in politics, but *how*. *Politics* is the art of living together in community, and living together in community was something very important to Jesus. So at some point, these two realms which, if out of sheer exhaustion or frustration, we might today want to separate and send to their rooms, with or without their supper, will meet. And if history is our guide, that meeting will more often result in dissonance, and not harmony.

The hint is right there in the first words we read from the letter to the Ephesians this morning. "This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." Dredge through those old stories you learned in Sunday School, and you're going to be reminded, Paul, and not a few of his compatriots and successors, were arrested. They'd done something that threatened the *political* order, and many paid with their lives. They're called "the martyrs" and their stories and wisdom have been preserved in sacred memory. And each in their own way understood their journey to martyrdom as a reflection of the core story of our faith: a Palestinian Jew, executed by the Roman government by crucifixion, which was a punishment reserved for the most grievous of political criminals—those whose actions threatened the stability of the empire. As far as moralizing on sexual issues, anointing our nation as God's Chosen nation, or glorifying military campaigns, I'm not quite as confident, but that the church must "steer clear" of politics doesn't seem to resonate with the core of our faith. I think Father Glen's right: it's not a question of *if*, but a matter of *how*, or perhaps to put a finer point on it, *to what end?*

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<sup>1</sup> "Conservative Evangelical Pastor Steers Clear of Politics, and Pays", Laurie Goodstein, *The New York Times*, Sunday, July 30, 2006, section 1 page 1.

Think through the logic of this chapter of Ephesians with me. “For this reason, I am a prisoner for Christ,” Paul says, and we know from other sources that there’s no metaphor here—he’d been locked up, because his loyalty to the God who had met him on the road to Damascus trumped the loyalties and oaths demanded of him by Rome. But it’s okay with him because it’s only as he did that—as he stepped outside the confines of the imperial order, that the mystery and the power of this faith that had grabbed hold of *him* began to unfold for in his life.

I’m reminded of an exchange between the two American philosophers and friends, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson had come to visit his friend, who refused to pay taxes during the Mexican war. “What are you doing in there?” Emerson asked. And Thoreau responded, “The question, Ralph Waldo, is what are you doing out there?” Think, for that matter, of Martin Luther King’s letters from the Birmingham jail, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s letters from the Nazi prisons in World War II. It’s not that faith and politics must in some way be kept in discrete boxes to prevent any cross pollination, but perhaps that the natural movement—the tide of faith—runs, not from the center out, but rather from the margins and works its way in. Maybe a God who saves this world through cross and tomb can only be grasped when you step aside from all the temptations of power?

It is, Ephesians reminds us, through the least, and not through the greatest, that God’s work is so often accomplished in this world. And in this Ephesians only reminds us of one of the broadest streams that runs through the entire course of Scripture: of a David who sets aside Solomon’s armor and faces Goliath with only a slingshot and a prayer; or a Nathan, who speaks a word of truth to that same David when the corruption of power leads him to adultery and murder; of Jeremiah, knee deep in an abandoned well, and Joseph, the youngest son. It’s no mistake that when Luke sings Mary’s song as she learns of the one she is to bear into this world, it is not set to the tune of any national anthem or a John Phillips Sousa March, but the quiet humming of a servant girl who understands what she cannot possibly know: “he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.” How can you listen to those words and then conclude that there’s no politics to be involved? It is because it is *this* God who met Paul along the road, who struck him blind, and led him helpless into the arms of those he had despised to be tended, and cared for, and healed, that he can say to that small community in Ephesus, “I pray that you might not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.”

Pastor Boyd was right this far in his words to his congregation: what we as Christians have to give to the world around us is not an endorsement, or a blessing, or a platform, but what we do have to offer is *wisdom*: “to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.” Then the text uses this magnificent couple of words to describe this wisdom which were translated in our reading this morning, “its rich variety” – So that through the church the wisdom of God, and its splendid and limitless, subtle and buoyant, delicious and luxuriant complexity—might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

The image that appeals to me is of a prism, that takes the light, and bends it ever so subtly, until a rainbow emerges where the human eye might only have been blinded by its whiteness. *That* is

the proper place of the Christian in the political world, not foreclosing possibilities, and enforcing narrow orthodoxies, but searching, especially in the margins, among the dispossessed, and the forgotten; the victims of what this world tends to mean when it speaks of and wields its power, for the “breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” in order that *we* might be filled with all the abundant, extravagant fullness God intends for this world.

It’s what Jesus spoke of as leaven, and salt, and it does not begin when the majority of citizens finally endorse the right candidates, or enough elected officials are finally swayed by political expedience to support some narrowly defined moral program or platform. It begins, as we read this morning, with a strengthening of our inner being, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts in faith, as you are rooted and grounded in love.” It is the most public, even political, of transformations that we seek—for this *world* to be saved from darkness and despair—but it begins in the inmost of ways, as we realize that the soil in which a true faith grows is not this or that political party or issue, but the love of God that we know to be poured out for us in Christ.

There’s another book I’ve been slogging my way through this summer, with the ponderous title of *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*. I’ve got neither the time nor the interest to burden you with the intricacies of its argument, but this much seems appropriate for this morning. The author, William Cavanaugh, suggests that the most significant thing that Christians can do in the face of the horrors of repression, and violence, and hatred which have been spawned in this modern political world of ours is to gather around the Lord’s Table, and make of ourselves, in faith, a viable alternative community, a *polis* constituted as we become that which we partake: as we become Christ’s body, broken for the healing and saving of this world.

It is, so Cavanaugh suggests, and so I believe, a profoundly *political* act: one that does not just seek to vouchsafe our souls for some mystical heaven in some time after time, but that enacts—embodies—the social and political, subversive and transforming love that God has shown this world in the one who is our Host, fulfilling the prayer, that we may have the power to literally comprehend—to encompass and hold; to make our own—“with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” so that we *are* filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we are able to ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.