

“Religion, Politics, and the Lines Between Them”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
at the First Parish in Wayland, MA
November 2, 2014*

Well, now that I’m formally installed and
you seem to be “stuck” with me for some time to come,
I decided to test just how serious you were about that
and preach about politics!

Don’t worry.

I know my boundaries and the boundaries
of our status as a 501c3 nonprofit—
I will not advocate for any particular candidate for office.
And, I will not advocate for any particular political party.

Personally, I have a long history
with questions of religion and politics.
Growing up as an evangelical Christian
in West Michigan in the 1970’s and 1980’s,
I was right there in the thick of the Religious Right—
raised in a community where
conservative Christianity and conservative politics
swirled together into a seemingly inseparable mix.

When I headed off to Wheaton College in Illinois,
things were definitely not much different.
To be clear this is not the Wheaton of Massachusetts.
Rather, the Wheaton that I attended in Illinois is
a non-denominational, evangelical college.
One of their preeminent alumni is the renowned
20th century evangelist, Billy Graham.
*In fact, Billy Graham was the commencement speaker
for my graduation!*

Wheaton took their religion very . . . very seriously.
In addition to required classes in Bible and Theology,
we were also had to attend chapel
multiple times each week.
Every semester a slip would arrive in my campus mailbox

with an assigned seat in the chapel.
Although enforcing the attendance
of the nearly 2000 students was no small feat,
at every service, there was a group of students
with clipboards and a seating chart dutifully marked
who was and was *not* in their seats.

So as you can imagine, attending chapel
became a pretty regular and predictable event.
Then, one day, I climbed the long flight of stairs to my current
assigned seat in the balcony
and found a piece of paper on my seat.
Looking around, I could see
row after row, seat after seat
of these same flyers.

Spread across the chapel were 2000 copies of voting guides
provided by the Christian Coalition of America—
one of the most powerful Religious Right
groups of the time.

Indeed, the Christian Coalition is *still* around
and *still* provides [voting guides](#)
that list a number of issues and
where each party's candidate stands on them.

This year, some of the issues on their voting guides are:

- Education vouchers that allow parents
to choose public or private school for their children
- Increasing federal income tax rates
- Permanent elimination of the federal marriage tax penalty
- Public funding of abortions, (such as govt. health benefits and Planned Parenthood)
- U.S. Constitutional Amendment to prohibit same sex "marriage"
- Repealing healthcare law (Obamacare) that forces citizens to buy insurance or pay a tax
- Enacting an energy independence plan that creates a free market for all energy sources and encourages homegrown clean energy innovation

I think that we can probably surmise which way
the Christian Coalition is leaning by the words they choose
to frame their issues.

In politics, rhetoric and word choice is always
half of the battle.

Yet, by focusing on issues and including both party's candidates
on their voting guides, they are completely within their
rights as a non-profit—a point they make clear
in the statement of explanation
that accompanies the voting guide(s).

They write:

“I want to assure you that your church or civic group has every
right to distribute these non-partisan voter guides,
and distributing them poses no threat whatsoever
to any organization's tax-exempt status.

In fact, Christian Coalition is the only organization
whose voter guides are prepared in accordance with IRS
approved guidelines for distribution in churches.”

Anyone's blood pressure up a little?

If so, maybe it's the particular framing of the issues
by the Christian Coalition that brings on the tension.

Or, maybe it's the new minister who's up here
talking about politics when she should
be steering clear of such topics.

So what am I up to?

I'm talking about religion and politics because I believe
that we cannot and should not ignore
how connected the two are in our U.S. society.

Over the last few weeks, reading and discussing Paul Razor's book,
Reclaiming Prophetic Witness, with a group of you
has reminded me of how profound . . .

and how disconcerting the connections between
religion and politics can be.

As Razor notes in the reading, in recent decades,
the Religious Right has been “the most visible
and vocal religious” group in the public square.

Within this larger socio-political context, its understandable
that religious liberals are skittish about bringing
their religious viewpoints into public discussion
and into the reasons they give
for where they stand on political issues.

My sense is that for many religious liberals
there is an instinctive awareness that in public discourse

religion often equals:
belief in a personal God, Lord, and Savior;
submission to the authority of ancient religious texts
and traditions as authoritative
even when in conflict
with reason and modern science;
as well as bigoted assumptions about
human sexuality that do more
to promote hate than love.

I for one do not see myself in this
conservative understanding of religion.

But, if this is what religion widely means in the public square,
then do we reject the term—do we stop calling ourselves
“religious” and look for another label . . .
like “spiritual” or “ethical”?

On the one hand,

I find this resistance to the term “religious”
to be understandable within a rhetorical context
that has so closely linked the idea of religion
to conservative religious viewpoints.

But, on the other hand,

I wonder if it is we, the religious liberals, who
should be pushing back against religious conservatives
and speaking out even more loudly
about another way of seeing the world?

In our book discussions,

we spent a lot of time simply talking about what this term
religion means as well as its cousin “faith.”

A number of people in the group expressed strong discomfort
with such language—preferring instead to use
language of ethics and values.

As you’ll learn about me, I feel strongly that language
evolves and changes, is alive and potent.

So, I understand *both* the need to refuse to use
certain language that is either painful or empty
and the need to sometimes actively
seek to reclaim and/or redefine a word
like religion.

In his book, Rasor is saying that liberal religious voices
should *not* give up on claiming the language of religion
in the public square.

I agree.

First of all, let me define how I use and understand the term religion.

To me, religion is the word we (can) use to describe
how we understand the ultimate questions about
life, the natural world, and our place in both.

How we answer these questions may lead us
to very many different places:

to scientific theories of cosmic dust
and the limits and impact of human organisms
on the eco-system;
to language of mindfulness and the practice
of breathing, of noticing, and of letting go;
or to concepts of God—
of wrestling with ancient texts and traditions
and how they might make sense in a
contemporary context.

My point is that I believe “religion” is about seeking
how to make sense of this life we’ve been given,
this world in which we find ourselves,
and these people with whom we share the planet.

Religion is about the beliefs we hold about what
ultimately matters in this shared life . . . and why.

Religion is about how these beliefs
then shape what we value
and what we consider to be moral.

It’s ok if you’re still sitting there skeptical.

The tradition of a free pulpit and a free pew
means that we don’t have to agree on everything.

But, if you do accept how I’m defining religion broadly—
as that human enterprise of meaning making,
of naming what matters,

and of living out these beliefs
through one’s ethics, values, and morals,
then this greatly shifts how we might see

the landscape of religion and politics.

In this broader understanding of religion,
conservative religious viewpoints like those of
the Christian Religious Right or fundamentalist Muslims,
are only a subset of possible ways
of being religious in the world.

There are other ways of being religious—
not only in private beliefs, but also in the public square.

Indeed, we stand in a stream of liberal religious men and women,
such as First Parish's own Lydia Maria Child,
whose radical beliefs in the equality of men and women,
black and white, free and slave,
inspired her and so many others
to speak out against slavery
and for the rights of women.

There is a very, *very* long list of Unitarians, Universalists,
and Unitarian Universalists who have been engaged in
public discourse and actions *as* liberal religious persons.

But what about us who live in a context
where public definitions of religion seem not to be broad,
but very, very narrow and limited?
Where public definitions of religion simply
don't seem to "fit" what we believe, value,
or think really matters . . . or is true?

Wouldn't it just be better to draw
a firm line *between* religion and politics to *divide* them?
Wouldn't it be best if everyone had to use a shared
secular language such as rights and privileges;
freedom and responsibilities?

In some ways and at some times using secular language
certainly functions very well.
Often secular language may even be
the best tool for the discussion—it certainly
is the right language for the state and the law.

Neither Razor, nor I are suggesting that we should stop
using secular language to engage in public discourses.

But, he is saying,
that we do not always need to stop there.
Sometimes, he argues,
we would do better to *also* speak religiously.

Why? Why do we gain from speaking religiously?

Most of us in the discussion group didn't think the book
did a great job of answering this question so let
me give it a try.

First, I think we need to speak religiously

as religious liberals, as Unitarian Universalists,
because religion is so much bigger and broader
than what religious conservatives believe.

By speaking out as religious liberals,

we're fighting to reclaim and redefine
the public understanding of religion.

By making liberal religion more visible, my hope is that
the next time someone is looking for a community
of people who share their values . . .
they might pause at our door
instead of rejecting us along
with all the other
religious options around.

Secondly, when we speak religiously in the world,

I believe that we are able to show how our convictions
matter not just for "me and mine",
but in ways that impact us all in our shared world.

When we speak religiously,

we frame our commitments and our values
in terms of the big picture and
in terms that reflect what really matters—
not just in this political season,
but, in light of the arc of the moral
universe bending towards justice.¹

Again and again, liberal religious voices have
cried out for more justice, equality, and inclusivity

¹ A paraphrase of the famous quote by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

in our shared political and social spaces—
from abolitionism, to the Civil Rights Act,
to the ongoing fight for the recognition
of same-sex marriage.

In our book discussion group,
we wrestled a lot with what it would look like for us
to speak religiously.

Trying to do so requires first answering “am I *religious*?”
And, if yes, then what *are* my religious beliefs?
And, how do these religious beliefs actually
impact and change where I stand on the issues,
on how I might vote this Tuesday?

I'm not going to try to answer these questions today—
but I name them as important ones to ask ourselves
and one another as we seek to live out our values,
our ethics, and our religious beliefs
in our shared world.

As you reflect on the lines between religion and politics,
I encourage you to not only look for the line that divides
them from one another,
but also for the lines that connect them
to each other.

All around us religion and politics are connected,
my hope is that we might be a part of making it clear
that conservative religion is only one option, one voice.

And I hope that we might together ask
how we might learn to claim and name the lines
between our own religious beliefs and our politics.

I wonder what a Unitarian Universalist “voter’s guide”
might look like. Well, I’ve not found one,
but I did find a poem by the marvelous poet-minister
Mark Belletini entitled, “Election Promises.”

I’ll close with his poem,
which reflects some of how we might bring our religion
into our votes and our hopes for our shared world:

I hear the polls
are going to be open on Tuesday. All day.
Good. I certainly intend to go to them.
I certainly invite you to go to them and vote too.
But today I say the polls are not just open on Tuesday,
I say they are open every day.
Every hour. Even here. Even now.
Right now, I am going to vote
for the robin's egg sky,
the vanilla clouds,
the purples shadow spreading
under the ginkgo tree. I am going to vote for tulips and redbuds.
I am going to vote for love
that does not have
to run in someone else's circles
in order to be love.
I'm going to vote the homeless into homes.
I'm going to vote the uneducated into classrooms
that teach them in the way they learn best,
not the way that would be most convenient.
I'm going to vote the sick into healing.
I'm going to vote the lost into belonging.
I'm going to vote, right now,
for the right to dream of a world
where the word politics
doesn't stop me in my tracks,
and where the word honor still
has a few good meanings left.
I'm going to vote right now
for the power of free people
to actually be free,
no matter who they are,
no matter who has abandoned them.
I actually am going to vote for love.
I am going to vote for truthfulness as the norm, not the exception.
I'm going to vote for a world that doesn't vote for killing, control and swagger. I'm
going to vote for you.
I'm going to vote for me.
Right now. Right here. Silently. But for real.

