

**Theme – Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World**

***“Where Faith and Politics Meet”***

March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008 at First United Methodist Church – Durango

**Luke 4:16-21**

*16 When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. 17 The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: 18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, 19 and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.” 20 He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. 21 Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!”*

**SLIDE “Seeing Gray: Where Faith and Politics Meet.”**

**VIDEO Where Faith and Politics Meet.**

**SLIDE “Seeing Gray: Where Faith and Politics Meet.”**

“Our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience to get involved in the political process.”

Today we begin a new series of sermons in which we are thinking together about the role of faith in public life. We are going to think about faith, morality and politics and in particular how we see some gray in a black and white world.

We are going to be asking questions like this. How can our faith lead us? How can our faith call us to be engaged in the public and political arena? How do we do that in a way that is faithful to what Jesus taught?

Today we are going to focus on where faith and politics meet. I'm reminded of the fact that most of us have learned somewhere along the way that there are two things you don't talk about among friends if you have manners. What are those two? They are religion and politics of course!

Today we are going to talk about both of them. Generally, you will allow me to talk about religion on a regular basis. But having a preacher talk to us about politics makes us all a little bit nervous. Some of you might

be saying to yourself, "Is he going to tell us who to vote for and what we are supposed to do in elections?"

Let me promise you this. By the time that we are done with this series of sermons you probably will still not know who I'm going to vote for in the elections. The goal is not to convince you who you should vote for, but instead it is to convince you that you should be involved. As people of faith you must be involved in the political process.

To begin with let's talk about why people of faith are essential to the political process. First let's consider the definition of these two words: Faith and politics.

**SLIDE      Defining the Terms - Faith is...**

Let's start with faith. There are many different ways you can define faith but here is how I will define it for today's sermon.

**SLIDE      Faith = our core values or beliefs.**

Our beliefs about God, about what it means to be human and about what is right and wrong are the center of faith.

If you have not done so already, I want to invite you to take out of your bulletin your sermon notes and study guide so you might write some of these things down as we go along. I want you to think about them more as we go through the week. In the sermon notes you will find a section where you can write down the definition the terms we are talking about. On the back side of those sermon notes are a study guide that will allow you to read some Scripture and go deeper during the week ahead.

Even if you are not a believer in God you still have some faith. Maybe you came today with a friend or because the topic interested you, but the reality is that all of us have core values and beliefs about what it means to be human, about whether there is a God or not, about what is right and wrong and what is just and unjust.

If you begin to understand that this is what faith is, then you have to ask yourself this question: if you are not engaging your faith in the political process then by what criteria are you using to make political decisions. If you're not involving your thoughts about right and wrong, just and unjust, what it means to be human, the nature of ultimate reality, then how are you making decisions?

We can't compartmentalize our faith and say our faith belongs over

here and that we have the real life that we live every other day during the week. No! Your faith is meant to influence every part of your life such as how you conduct business, how you treat your neighbors, how you interact with your spouse if you're married or how you are engaged in politics.

Let's think about the definition of politics for a minute. Gore Vidal offered a tongue-in-cheek definition of politics. He looked at the etymology of the word.

**SLIDE      Poly = Many**

**Tics = Blood sucking insects**

I don't think that is really what politics is about. If you were a political science major in college or if you had any political science classes in the last 30 years then you would have been given this definition by Harold Lasswell, a prominent political scientist and sociologist from the last century.

**SLIDE      Politics is the process for determining who gets what, when and how.**

This is about power. This is about distribution. This is about control.

When you think of it this way, if politics is about determining these things, then it requires some measure of morality. There needs to be some sense of what is right and wrong, what is just or unjust. If you don't bring justice or a sense of what is right or wrong or what it means to be human to the equation when you are doing politics, then what are you basing your politics on?

You put a finger up in the wind and simply see where the wind is blowing? Are you taking a poll every time you make a decision just to see what the majority says?

Certainly in a democracy, the power and the will of the majority are important, but they are not everything. There are checks and balances on that because even if the majority wishes to do something which is unjust, it is still unjust.

Politics requires people of faith to be engaged in the process. People with a moral conscience and people who have thoughtfully considered the issues; people who have a sense of what is right and what is wrong need to bring that to the table.

If you have paid attention to the caucuses and primaries over the past few months than you know that they have involved people of faith on both sides. On the more conservative side, the Christian evangelicals turned out en masse to support the Republican candidate Mike Huckabee in the Iowa caucuses. You may know that he not only is the former governor of Arkansas but he is also an ordained Southern Baptist pastor.

On the Democratic side there is no candidate on either side who has spent more time talking about the connection of faith and politics than Barak Obama.

In preparing for this sermon series I read several books and one of them is this fascinating book entitled, Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics, by Jacques Berlinerblau, a professor at Georgetown University who has written for the Washington Post. In his book he simply outlines how each candidate and each political party in this current election use the Bible and faith in their political campaigns.

In his book you can read what these two persons have had to say about faith and politics. Let me share with you a quote from each one. The first is from Mike Huckabee in his book, Character is the Issue.

**SLIDE** *Politics are totally directed by worldview. That is why when people say, "We ought to separate politics from religion," I say, "To separate the two is absolutely impossible."*

John McCain had this to say about the role his religion in politics.

**SLIDE** *"I pray regularly, and I don't have to be getting ready for bed, or be getting up in the morning. I seize opportunities throughout the day."*

*"I haven't always succeeded; I've failed many times. But because the foundation of my belief is redemption, I've been able to receive additional comfort, strength and the desire to move forward again."*

Here is what Barack Obama had to say in a speech to the progressive evangelical organization Sojourners:

***The problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed – are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect 10 point plan. They are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness in the imperfections of man. Solving these problems will require changes in government policy, but it will also***

*require changes in hearts and a change in minds.*

**SLIDE** *Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public square. Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., indeed the majority of great reformers in American history were not only motivated by faith but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their personal morality into public policy debates is a practical absurdity.*

Hillary Clinton, in a recent interview for Crosswalk.com, said:

**SLIDE** *“Christians must put into action what we believe in all spheres of life, including the public sphere.”*

On this point Huckabee, McCain, Clinton and Obama agree.

Having said that, it is important to offer some caution about how we interject our faith into the political process. I would like to offer three mistakes that can be made as we bring our faith to bear in politics.

**SLIDE** **Three Dangerous Mistakes in Faith and Politics.**

When it comes to involving our faith in politics the first critical mistake that sometimes is made and it can be deathly dangerous is to use the language of faith, and religion, as a cloak or a means of excusing or even justifying the doing of evil.

**SLIDE** **Using Faith in Support of Evil**

You have seen this. We witnessed on the news people who flew airplanes into buildings in the last thing they said was, "God is great." But it is not just extremist Muslims who have done things like that.

People in the name of Jesus have also done many things that were evil and wrong. The third Commandment tells us not to use God's name in vain, or to misuse the name of God. We think of this as having to do with cussing. But it had nothing to do with cussing when it was given to Moses. Certainly that would be an application today, but in the days of Moses no one would have dared to say the name of God the way we just casually throw God's name around today. That was not what people were thinking about it all when they read the third Commandment.

Instead, it was using God's name in speaking on behalf of God to

claim things that God himself never would've claimed. When we understand the Commandment in this way there are two categories of people that most frequently violate the third Commandment.

The first are preachers. The second are politicians.

So we want to be careful when a politician begins to use religion as a way of rallying support for a particular position. Now it may be that a position is consistent with the kingdom of God, but it is also possible that it is not.

If we see that the position being advocated by using God's name actually hurts people we should be very, very afraid. Let me give you an example of a politician who did this. I'm going to read you a quote and invite you to see if you can figure out who it was who said this. This was a stump speech.

**SLIDE** *I say, my Christian feeling tells me that my Lord and Savior is a warrior. It calls my attention to the man who, lonely and surrounded by a few supporters, recognized what they [the Jews] really were, and called for a battle against them. And who by God was not the greatest sufferer but the greatest warrior [Jesus].*

Do you know who said that? In 1922 it was this man.

**SLIDE** **Adolph Hitler.**

Hitler spoke this as he rallied for his Nazi party across the streets and hills and countryside of Germany.

Be careful when people use religious language to gain power. We should critique this kind of language and be cautious. They may be speaking the truth about what God would uphold, but they may not.

**SLIDE** **Oversimplifying, Polarizing and Certainty.**

The second major mistake when it comes to religion and politics is to oversimplify complex issues. If you have an absolute opinion about what is right and wrong and you are unwilling to question your own perceptions, and your own biblical interpretations and theology, then you can run into problems.

These first two often go hand-in-hand. We see the world in black and white and we want the world in black and white. We want simple solutions to complex problems. We want a candidate to tell us in two minutes or less

how they would solve the social security problem - how they would deal with the environment - how they are going to handle immigration reform - what they are going to do to make our nation more secure - how to provide health care for everyone who needs it.

Do you really think any candidate can effectively answer any of those questions in two minutes or less? But this is what we want isn't it? Actually, we don't even want two-minute answers. What we really want are 30 or 60 second sound bites that we can fit in between sporting event breaks or sitcom commercials to solve complex problems.

That is dangerous. There are many people willing to give us 60 second answers and some of us gravitate towards those black-and-white solutions.

Part of this entire sermon series is aimed to help us see the nuance between the black and the white - to encourage people to see and look for the answers on both sides and to find that the truth is not found on simply one side or the other, but often somewhere in between. In many ways, this is why we have two political parties and have to work together.

But we have this idea that we want simple answers and we tend to oversimplify. People of faith do this often.

I would encourage you to remember that your own views over time have changed. If you are growing in your faith and maturing as a human being, then your views will change over time. Yet what we often find ourselves looking for are the views we had when we were 16 years old or 12 years old or six years old when things seemed simpler.

In several of the recent debates one of the tools that were used was YouTube. YouTube is an online service where you can post videos. The videos in this case were ones that people made of themselves as they responded to the answers different candidates gave. People would also give questions for the candidates on video which the candidates with an answer. The attempt was to try and pull more young people into the process because so many people use and participate in YouTube.

If you think that seems silly and let me share with you that if you took the number of people who have joined YouTube and use it regularly to communicate with each other they would be that ninth largest nation and the world.

In one of the early debates there was a particular question about religion and politics which I thought was interesting. It captured the oversimplification that happens for many of us in the face. A man named Joseph asked this question of the Republican candidates. Take a listen to his question.

**VIDEO Bible Debate Question**

**SLIDE Seeing Gray.**

If you would like to hear the responses of the different candidates you can go to [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com) and look up “question 19.” You can actually listen to their responses to that question.

But here's a bigger question for you. "Joseph, is that really all we need to know to decide which of these candidates we are going to support for the president of the United States?" Is it really a matter of whether they literally believe that particular book, which you notice was the King James Version of the Bible, which doesn't take advantage of all the great scholarship which has occurred in the last 500 years?

“If you just believe the Bible literally, that’s all I need to know.”

That's not all you need to know. Even when it comes to biblical interpretation there are lots of places where it is gray. There are many places where we have to understand nuance in the complex ways in which people thought in the past and how we apply that to the present.

I want us to be people of faith who understand that—who come at this and we recognize the complexity and we don't look for simple answers to the problems of our world which are complex. I hope we're willing to do some thinking about the issues.

One way to look at this is to look at the realities of black and white in terms of pictures. This image on the video screen is pretty easy to understand.

**SLIDE Line.**

It is a simple black line on a white background. It is two-dimensional and it is not very complex. It just is what it is. It is just black and white.

Some issues are like this. They are simple and there is just a clear right and a clear wrong and there is no ambiguity or complexity to it. But most of life is not like this.

Take a look at this photograph. I took this photo in the fall as we came through Ridgeway from Grand Junction.

**SLIDE      Ridgeway Color Black and White.**

There is no color or gray in this picture. It is just black and white. But let's add a little gray to it.

**SLIDE      Ridgeway Colors Gray.**

We can start to differentiate the sky from the mountains from the trees. We begin to see what a magnificent sight this is because we see the shades of gray and not just black and white. We also recognize that the world is not just shades of gray but a multitude of colors.

**SLIDE      Ridgeway Colors.**

We can really begin to see the beauty as we add those colors.

That's what I want to encourage us to do in the sermon series. Yes, there are things in black and white and so we see them in black-and-white.

But there are so many things that require a willingness to recognize the complexity and the nuances in between the black and white that are shades of gray in brilliant colors.

There have to be people of faith who see this and raised this issue up—who look at the questions in the complex issues from this perspective.

There is one last dangerous mistake that can be made with relationship to faith and politics.

**SLIDE      Separating Politics from Faith (the Twin Messages of the Prophets)**

We can say, "You know what? There really is no connection here between faith and politics. My faith is about how I love the Lord and my relationship with him and going to church and doing Bible study. All of that is my faith over here on one side."

"Then my politics and everyday world are over here and I keep them completely separate."

The Bible is very clear that this does not work in God's eyes. Throughout the Minor Prophets and the Major Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, God continually addresses this. The people thought they were doing God's will when they were keeping their private

religion and not wearing it on their shirt sleeves and not bringing it into the public arena.

In God says, "This is unacceptable."

We just finished studying the book of Isaiah and one example of this is in Isaiah 58. The people were faithfully worshiping God and they were studying the Scriptures that were available to them in that day. They were praying and fasting and yet God says this:

**SLIDE 2** *They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me. They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God. They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me.*

**3** *'We have fasted before you!' they say. 'Why aren't you impressed? We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don't even notice it!'*

*"I will tell you why!" I respond. "It's because you are fasting to please yourselves. Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers. 4 What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling? This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me. 5 You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord?*

**6** *"No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. 7 Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.*

**8** *"Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. 9 Then when you call, the Lord will answer. 'Yes, I am here,' he will quickly reply.*

If politics is the process of determining who gets what, when and how, God has very strong feelings about these things. God says to us that we dare not divorce our faith from how we live out our lives in the daily world

which includes our politics.

**SLIDE      The Politics of Jesus.**

This leads us to consider the politics of Jesus. Many of us grew up thinking that Jesus was apolitical. He's not involved in politics and he does not have anything to say about politics. Jesus is our personal savior.

Part of the reason that we say this is because we don't fully understand the politics of Jesus' day. There were political parties in the holy land in the time of Jesus. There were the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the Essenes and the Zealots. These are the political parties of Jesus' day who had power and controlled who got what, when and how—when the Romans weren't controlling it. Jesus had a lot to say to these folks.

But the political power or structure of Jesus' day was monarchy. There were kings who ruled over the land. During Jesus' public ministry around the Sea of Galilee there was a king named Herod Antipas who ruled, he believed at the will of God. He also ruled at the pleasure of the King of kings and Lord of lords. That would be Tiberius Caesar in Rome.

In the first century if you asked, "Who is the King of kings and Lord of lords?" Everyone could tell you the answer to that. It was not Jesus but it was Tiberius Caesar.

When we understand this then as we read Jesus' very first sermon it takes on a very powerful meaning. Do you remember his first sermon? The gospel of Mark shares it with us and it is very short. Jesus came preaching to the people:

**SLIDE      *Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.***

It was not the kingdom of Rome which was at hand. It was not the kingdom of Herod Antipas or the kingdom of Tiberius Caesar.

The kingdom of God which is at hand and this was a political sermon and he was making a political statement and the people were to repent and change their ways because God's kingdom was near. He said, "The kingdom of God is upon you and the kingdom of God is near," and then he finally says, "The kingdom of God is within you."

God ruling and reigning as your King is within you. Then he called people to become citizens of the kingdom of God first and foremost. Then out of that they were to live out their faith in God and all the other areas of

their lives. Everything that Jesus said and did was about unpacking this idea of the kingdom of God.

When Jesus one about his public ministry he devoted most of his time to healing the sick. This was a political act. He was saying that in God's Kingdom God cares about the people who are sick. One night he stayed up all night long healing the sick. What does that tell us about God's concern for people who are sick?

**What might that tell us about the health care crisis?** It does not give us the answer but it tells us that God cares about this issue. God is concerned about the fact that there are children who do not have insurance and their moms and dads are afraid to take him to the doctor because they don't have the \$50 or \$100 or \$500 to pay the doctor. We know that because Jesus stayed up all night long healing people in much of what he did in his public ministry was healing the sick.

The Scriptures in Jesus' ministry does not tell us how to solve the problem, but it does say, "God cares about this issue and you should also." Our answer must somehow be consistent with what Jesus did for those who are sick.

Do you know who in this country started most of the hospitals and health-care system? It was church people. Churches started hospitals because they believed this was part of the ethic of Jesus and the kingdom of God which was to heal the sick.

Interestingly enough, most hospitals were started for the poor because the rich could afford to have the doctor come to their house. It was only later on that they became moneymaking ventures.

Jesus then gives parables. Jesus tells about Lazarus who is a poor man. This is not the Lazarus that he raised from the dead but in this story he was a beggar. He has sores all over his body and Jesus went on to say that the dogs came and licked his sores, he was that poor and that destitute. Lazarus sat outside the home of a wealthy man on the street. The wealthy man would walk past him every day and didn't do squat.

Jesus then tells us that both of these men died. Where did Lazarus end up? He ended up in the bosom of Abraham and is receiving comfort for all the sorrows that he experienced in this life. But where does the rich man end up? He ended up in hell.

This was a political parable about the kingdom of God. It was demanding that people who were citizens of God's kingdom care about the poor and those with little resources.

Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the sheep and the goats that you probably know. Jesus said that on the last day those who will be consigned to hell are those who saw the hungry and the naked and the thirsty and the sick and those in prison and they did not do anything. Jesus is making a very powerful political point that we have to pay attention to.

Once again, Jesus does not give us all the answers about how to care for those who are poor, but he is telling us that we have to care and be willing to do something if we are to be citizens of the kingdom of God.

Then Jesus teaches us how to pray when the disciples ask them, "How should we pray?" Jesus said, "When you pray you should pray like this..." Go ahead and say it with me.

**SLIDE Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

I have news for you. This is a political prayer. We are not just supposed to pray that, we are supposed to work at it. We are supposed to do something about building God's kingdom. We are to pray daily that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven and that his kingdom would come here and now. Then we work to fulfill that prayer because we are to be the presence of Jesus Christ and the world.

Jesus gave other parables like the parable of the talents. In this parable the servants are each in trusted with something and they are to take care of it while the Master is away. Do you think that has anything to do with the stewardship of the environment, or the crisis related to the environment as we watched this last week another large section of the Antarctic shelf fall away? Do you think this says anything about taking care of the earth that God has entrusted to us?

What about the parable of the Good Samaritan? In this story the foreigner is the one who helps the man on the side of the road who is the resident. Does that parable have anything to say to us about how we treat illegal immigrants in our land?

While it does not provide a solution I would argue that it does tell us something about the heart that we should have.

When it comes to how America conducts itself internationally, does this statement from Jesus mean anything? "If any among you would be great then you must become a servant."

When it comes to Jesus' ministry there were two things that he emphasized. On the one hand it is the emphasis of Jesus as our personal savior and this is really important.

### **SLIDE      The Two Sides of Jesus' Gospel**

What happens is that churches tend to divide along these lines in so some focus on this emphasis of Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior. We must be born again and be changed from the inside out. We can have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and he will save us from our sins and he will offer us everlasting life. He walks with us and talks with us along life's narrow way.

That is the foundational message of the Christian faith and I want every one of you to know it—that God knows you and love you by name. God forgives your sins and you can have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ—that he died for you and rose from the grave so that you can have hope. You must be born again and changed from the inside out.

That is the first part of the gospel but it is empty without the second part of the gospel. This is not the entire gospel.

The second part of the gospel is the call to holiness and action. It is the call to serve the poor and pursue justice and righteousness in the world. It is the call to do God's will everywhere we go.

Jesus says that we are to, "Go into all the world and make disciples, and obey the things I commanded you to obey."

So there are churches that focus on this part of the gospel. Typically mainline churches in the last century focused on this which we call the "social gospel." They were all about justice and righteousness and civil rights and equal rights. We protested the wrong use of violence in all kinds of issues like this and they were doing great work, except we forgot to tell people that they needed a savior. We forgot to invite them to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We forgot that people needed to be born again. So people were trying to do the right things but without the power that comes from knowing Jesus Christ personally.

Those focused on the first are the gospel were remembering to tell

people about Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, they forgot to tell people why Jesus saved them—which was for this mission to bring about the kingdom of God.

So what we tried to do here at First United Methodist Church is to bring these two together and say you have to have both. You have to love God with all your heart AND you love your neighbor as you love yourself. That is the gospel that Jesus lived and preached—personal holiness combined it with social holiness—salvation and social action.

That is the gospel for which Jesus died. That is the gospel for which Jesus rose again. That is the gospel which Jesus has charged you and me with each and every day.

That is why we say our purpose is to be Jesus Christ to the world—both his message of salvation and mission of serving those in need.

### **SLIDE     Integrating Your Faith with Your Politics**

I want to remind you that we live with a form of government in this country which requires thoughtful people of conscience to get involved for this system to work.

The ancients were not in favor of democracy. Aristotle and Plato said that democracy would be a disaster because people would not participate in the way that they should. They were not smart enough. They would not take the time to find out the answers. People could not be trusted to govern themselves and so early philosophers did not advocate democracy—at least not as we know it.

Even our founding fathers thought this was a risky experiment. They said, "We think this will work, but we are not sure it will work."

So they built in some safeguards. You know that you don't directly elect the president of the United States. You elect the Electoral College. Why? Because they weren't sure the American people could be trusted to make the right decisions. The reality is that sometimes we are kind of silly about how we make our decisions.

During the last election, when I asked a friend of mine why she had voted for the presidential candidate she selected, she said jokingly but not really, "Because he was handsome." That may not really cut it.

We need to be looking at and taking seriously the kind of issues that our country is facing in the quality that is needed in our leadership. If we

don't do that in a democracy then there are devastating consequences.

There is another way that a safeguard was built into our process. You may know that before 1914 you did not elect your own senators. Senators were appointed by the state legislature because they were not really certain that you could be trusted to elect both the House of Representatives and the Senate. So the senators were a check on the folks that you would directly elect which were the House of Representatives.

Let me repeat something I said at the beginning of the sermon.

**SLIDE      Our country and our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of conscience to get involved in the political process.**

If we don't then I don't think we have much of a future in our country. So let me challenge you in a couple of ways as we wrap this up.

**SLIDE      Are you registered to vote?**

First, I want to challenge you to register to vote. You have a responsibility and opportunity to bring to bear your faith as you participate in our political process. Are you registered to vote? If you are not, then please go register down at the courthouse on 2nd Ave.

**SLIDE      Are you becoming informed about the key issues that are facing our country and our community locally?**

If a reporter were to ask you today, "What are the four or five most important issues facing our country today?" Would you have a good answer to that?

If you know what you believe those issues are, then have you explored what the possible solutions might be that are most in keeping with the kingdom of God and the reign of Jesus Christ? Have you looked at what people believe on each side of those issues? Have you come to some preliminary conclusion yourself? If you have not taken the time to look at those things I hope you will in the days ahead.

**SLIDE      Have you examined the candidates?**

Do you know who the candidates are who are running for office? Do you know anything about them other than what they look like? Have you actually examined their beliefs and their positions on the key issues? How many of you have watched the debate? If you have not watched one, then I

hope you will only get down to the head to head debates after the national conventions this spring and summer. Record them on your DVR and watch them later if you have to. You can watch them on the Internet which is what I do. But somehow take the time to get to know who these candidates are and what they stand for and not just because they're in the political party in which your parents raised you.

## **SLIDE      VOTE!**

Take seriously the opportunity to put your faith in politics together by voting. We have already had the caucuses here in Colorado for the primaries, but the general election on the first Tuesday in November will include not only national elections for the president but also local elections and ballot measures including the current hot button issue which is what to do with Florida Road!

Let me be clear that I am not concerned about whom you vote for or how you vote. I just want you who are people of faith who can see the complexities and nuances in life to be involved as thoughtful Christian people.

When I was at the National Pastors Conference a few weeks ago they had several movies that we were able to preview. Some were not yet released like the new Chronicles of Narnia movie, "Prince Caspian." But some were already in theaters like, "The Great Debaters."

"The Great Debaters," is no longer in theaters but it will be released on April 29 in DVD and I hope you will rent that movie and watch it. It is an exceptional movie featuring Denzel Washington. You will find yourself clapping at the end of the movie.

The movie is about a team of debate students at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas which is one of our historical Black Methodist Colleges. The year is 1935 and in that year black college debate teams did not have a chance to debate white college debate teams.

The team at Wiley College changed all of that when they began to debate white college teams and win. The culmination was a match with the Harvard debate team.

This is a true story and James Farmer was one of the key persons who is played in the film by Forest Whitaker. James Farmer was the first African-American with a Ph.D. in a state of Texas. He was a remarkable

man who was a deacon in the Methodist Church. He had a son who is James Farmer Jr. and who graduated from high school at the age of 14 and then one on to Wiley College.

There comes a point in the film where a great injustice has been done to James Farmer Jr. There is a sheriff in town who has been perpetrating the injustice and he goes to the sheriff and says, "This is not right." The son, James Farmer Jr., is standing there and knows his father can be put in prison or his dad might be beat up or his dad could be killed for standing up for what was right.

But his dad does not back down and at that moment the camera pans over to James Farmer Jr.'s face. What you see in the face of that 14-year-old boy is a young man who feels nothing but pride for his father. He is so proud of his dad for standing up for what is right.

James Farmer Jr. went on to become one of the four leading civil rights figures in the 20th century. He was presented with the Presidential Medal of Honor in 1988 just before he died. This man shaped and changed the 20th century and it all started when he saw his dad and he was proud of his dad for standing up for what was right.

As I thought about that scene here is the thought that went through my head. *Will my children ever see their dad stand up for anything that requires some moral courage—that takes a risk—that requires standing up against a majority of people that see things in a different way? Or will they only see their dad play it safe?*

And then that got me thinking about you. I wondered, "Will our children here—will your children—look at you with pride because you stood up for things that were important—you made your voice heard—you allowed your moral courage in your face to guide your life and to take risks and to live dangerously in order to shape your world into God's kingdom?"

Or will they say, "My mom and dad always played it safe—went along with the crowd, and did what everyone else did."

I will say this one more time.

**SLIDE      Our democracy rises or falls based upon the willingness of thoughtful people of moral courage and conviction, people of conscience, to participate in the political process.**

That is the connection between faith and politics. Let's pray.

*Oh God we give you thanks and praise. You are our King, and we are your subjects. We thank you for the call of Jesus on our lives to follow him, and for how clearly he showed us what it means to be human beings.*

*We ask for your forgiveness for our apathy—our willingness to let others make our decisions for us. We pray for your forgiveness for the times that we were too afraid to stand up and hold a position contrary to what all of our neighbors held—or times that we did not stop and think through the issues—or times that we held a position that was inconsistent with your teaching.*

*We pray that you would make us people of moral conscience, thoughtful people of moral courage and conviction who are willing to stand up—who are willing to get involved—who are willing to be salt and light. Help us do this together.*

*Bless this nation oh God and help America to be everything you wanted to be. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.*

*Seeing Gray: Faith, Morality and Politics in a Black and White World*

## “Where Faith and Politics Meet”

### **Luke 4:16-21**

16 When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. 17 The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: 18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, 19 and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.” 20 He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. 21 Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!”

### **Introduction**

#### **I. Defining the Terms**

- A. Faith is...
- B. Politics is...

- C. The candidates on Faith and Politics

## **II. Three Dangerous Mistakes in Faith and Politics**

- A. Using Faith in Support of Evil
- B. Oversimplifying, Polarizing and Certainty
- C. Separating Politics from Faith (the Twin Messages of the Prophets)

## **III. The Politics of Jesus**

- A. Jesus as Lord and King
- B. The Two Sides of Jesus' Gospel
- C. Contemporary Examples

## **Conclusion: Integrating Your Faith with Your Politics**

### **Study Guide**

This week we will look at several passages in the scripture in which we can see the intersection between faith and politics.

**Monday, March 31** - Read 2 Samuel 12:1-14 – In this passage of scripture you will find the words of Nathan the prophet to King David. We read of the political ruler, King David, being confronted by a religious prophet, Nathan. Nathan has strong words for David and his actions, but also calls him to repentance for committing adultery with Bathsheba and sending her husband Uriah to his death (You can find this story in 2 Samuel 11). Where are the intersections of faith and politics today? Nathan delivered a message from God to King David. What message do you think God has for political leaders today? What message might God have for you today?

**Tuesday, April 1** - Read Psalm 51:1-12 – Yesterday we read the story of the prophet Nathan delivering a strong message from God to King David. The scripture for today is often understood to be David's response to God's word from Nathan. This passage contains passionate words of regret and a desire to be made clean by God. We find the words of the prophet have made a great impact on the king. Yesterday, we considered God's word for political leaders and for ourselves. Today ask yourself - How do you think political leader's today would or do respond to a message from God? How do you respond to God's message for

your life?

**Wednesday, April 2** - Read 1 Kings 3:4-15 – Solomon has just become king. One of the first things he does as a political leader is offer sacrifices to God. That night, God converses with Solomon in a dream and responds to Solomon's request for wisdom. These are important events in the life of the new King, Solomon, and shape his life as a political leader. Do you think religious practices shape the life of political leaders today? If so, how? If not, why not?

**Thursday, April 3** - Read 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-16, 20-22 – Bringing the ark into Jerusalem was a great event in the life of the people of Israel. King David dances before the ark as it is entering the city. This decreases Michael's view of him and his leadership. How do you respond to a political leader talking about or publicly practicing their faith? Is your reaction different if the faith is of a different tradition than yours?

**Friday, April 4** - Read Isaiah 58:1-9 – Verse two of this passage reads, "For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of God" (TNIV). As you read the rest of the passage consider this question – Is the nation seeking to do what is right? Is the nation keeping to the commands of God? What about in this country - what are your responses to these questions?

*This study guide was written by Rev. Andrew Conard from the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection.*