

Steve Jungkeit  
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Text: Revelation 18: 20-24, 19: 1a  
November 13, 2022

A Public Faith:  
Notes on Religion Outside the Private Sphere

Not long ago I met a person in town that I hadn't known previously. We talked for a while, and then he asked what I did for a living. Here we go, I thought, and then said, "I'm a minister." Where, he wanted to know, and I told him here, in Old Lyme, at the First Congregational Church. Oh yeah, I know the one you're talking about he said - the political church.

I winced. He meant no harm - at least I don't think he did. But it struck a nerve. Not because we haven't taken strong positions on many important public issues, but because it felt like a way of reducing who we are, putting our community into a fairly small container. I told him that I tended to think less in explicitly political terms, and more in terms of public ethics, which has an obvious political dimension. I told him as well that that represented but one component of what this community is about, and that our worship, our music, our outreach, and our care for one another are all important parts of what we do. Our advocacy is what people tend to notice, and rightly so, but it's not the entirety of who we are. Be that as it may, I haven't seen that new acquaintance in church, which indicates that I probably wasn't successful in persuading him to give us a try.

I'm well aware that we have a reputation in this region for being political - though usually when people say that, it's simply a way of declaring that they themselves have a different kind of politics. And I'm also aware that some of you might encounter friction from time to time from people who may not understand what this place is about, believing that we are, merely, political. Occasionally, I've heard questions voiced from the pews about why we do as we do around here, about why we insist upon bringing the issues of the day into our faith. For the most part, I hear these as questions of curiosity, rather than criticism. Add to all that some questions that roll around my own mind at times: By taking strong public stands, do we not risk simply being the mirror image of the religious right, with a different set of issues, but equally obnoxious? By taking strong public stands, do we not risk reducing ourselves to being no more than the Democratic Party at prayer, the way evangelicals have reduced themselves to being the Republican Party at prayer? Finally, when we take a public, ethical stand on some issue, do we not flaunt one of the most important principles in our democracy, the separation of church and state? Those are all questions that have been asked of me over the years, and they're questions that I turn over in my head. Maybe you do too.

Perhaps it's time, for my sake and for yours, to lay out some principles we can steer by when thinking about these questions. They're principles learned from the Bible, but also from the long history of theology and of the church. They're principles that predate the Reformation, but they're also embedded deeply in what it means to be a part of the Congregational Church, and of the Reformed tradition more widely. Given the election cycle we've just passed through, it seems worthwhile to clarify what it is we actually believe about religion and politics.

Before we do anything else, though, I need to be clear about what I mean when I say "politics." We'll get to the Bible in a few minutes, but in the widest sense of the word, I find

Aristotle's definition to be most helpful. The word itself, he demonstrates, comes from the Greek word *polis*, or "city." In the broadest sense, then, politics has to do with a conversation about how life might best be organized within the city, or among any large collection of people. It's a conversation about how to achieve the greatest possible good for the greatest amount of people. I find Aristotle's understanding helpful, because it helps us to distinguish that form of politics from a less helpful one, which simply has to do with party politics, achieving wins for one's team, or taking on positions over against someone else for the sake of our own sense of identity. That form of politics has become bitter and divisive, and many of us rightly wish to avoid it. In Aristotle's sense, then, every time we ask questions about how our lives might be organized together, we're in the realm of the political. That means that politics is an integral part of any community of faith, and really, of any community at all, from the nuclear family all the way up the scale to nations and international relations. How might we best organize ourselves to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people is, perhaps, the fundamental question for most any organization. And that's certainly true of faith communities.

Now for our principles. The first one is deceptively simple, and maybe obvious, but it's got some tendrils worth chasing. In the Bible and throughout the history of theology, faith is always meant to be lived in public, not in some private zone of the heart. The latter is an outgrowth of piety, which we actually don't find much of in the Bible. Just consider: the exodus is a public event. The formation of the kingdoms of Judah and of Israel are political, and public events. The Babylonian exile is a public event. The words of the prophets are delivered publicly, to the people and their leaders. The ministry, the trial, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus are all public events, as is Pentecost, and the formation of the early churches. Were religion a private affair of the heart, none of those events could have occurred. In the Bible, and in the history of theology, faith is always a public affair.

When I hear criticisms about politics entering the church doors, it's actually a form of piety that I hear, one wholly at odds with the Bible. Piety would relegate faith to a private affair of the heart, to be practiced behind the closed doors of a house of worship. Now, here are the tendrils: that's a very tempting position to take, especially when various forms of fundamentalism are trying to exert power in public life. For example, I would gladly see some of the fundamentalists currently trying to wrest control of the government, or any number of their snake-mean Christian cronies, safely shut up within some private zone where we wouldn't have to consider their noxious views ever again. Let them hang out in their churches or gun clubs and leave the rest of us alone. The problem, though, is that the same logic would have to hold true in other cases as well. If faith is an entirely private affair that we use to shut down the fundamentalists, that would also imply that all the leaders of the civil rights movement should have stayed at home and kept their faith to themselves. If we say that the fundamentalists must practice their faith in private - and believe me, I'd like to - we'd also have to say it for most of the faith leaders many of us admire most deeply - MLK and Dorothy Day, Fannie Lou Hamer and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the abolitionists and Congressman John Lewis, Reinhold Niebuhr and Abraham Heschel and so many more. Like it or not, we need to resist the temptation of consigning faith to the private sphere alone, safely out of reach. Instead, I think we have to argue at the level of theology. In other words, the problem with the fundamentalists is not that they think their faith has public significance. It's that their faith and theology are misguided and wrong, and should be loudly denounced as such.

So faith is public. That's our first principle. Our second principle is this (and it may be considerably less obvious): in Aristotle's sense, and in that of the Bible, there's no outside to

politics. There's never a question of escaping it, or living outside of it. You can no more escape politics than you can live outside of the economy, or outside of language. A safe space from which to neutrally and objectively survey the processes taking shape all around us simply does not exist. We're inescapably caught up in the flux of politics, the flux of history, the flux of time. Our subjectivity is summoned and called forth, simply by dint of being alive. That's why, whenever someone claims to be outside of the political, you can be sure that they are the ones who are most deeply embedded in a particular kind of politics. To demand that one not be political is to make a very political demand.

Let's translate this to the churches. Churches that claim to be free of politics are actually engaging in a very precise form of politics, which is to say, not tampering with the status quo. Similarly, when people have complained, as they have from time to time, about the mixing of politics and the pulpit, I like to point out that that complaint is itself a very political demand, used to silence a different form of politics. Now, there are, obviously, better and worse ways of engaging political questions from the perspective of faith, ways which allow people the freedom and the grace to be where they are without judgment or coercion, even amidst disagreements. But it's never, ever a question of living outside or above the political.

That leads to our third principle. It has to do with the freedom and autonomy that each of us is given in the depths of our being - the freedom to think, the freedom to be, the freedom to wrestle, the freedom to decide, without the fear of wrath or censure. A theologian I admire named William Stringfellow argued that the Bible never furnishes us with a system of ethics or with a moral code that can be applied to all situations everywhere across time. Instead, he argues, the Bible, and by extension, God, trusts humanity to grapple with a basic question, a question that will receive different answers in different times: how we might live humanly in the midst of the Fall? Or, put a little differently, how might we live humanly in the midst of the alienation and estrangement that is a part of the human condition? Immediately behind that question is the conviction that we must all, as the Apostle Paul put it, work out our own salvation with fear and with trembling. I cannot do it for you, and you cannot do it for me. And so my answers to the public issues that confront us from week to week may be different than your answers. But we covenant to respect the ways in which we each choose to enact our humanity, even as we recognize that it is impossible to enact our humanity apart from the humanity of everyone else. So instead of a rigid code, the Bible provides us with questions that we must use to determine our own responses to the issues of the day. How might we live humanly amidst the Fall, amidst so much alienation, amidst so much estrangement?

Oddly, one of the best places we can see that question at work in the Bible is found in the book of *Revelation*. It's a formidably difficult book that has been either largely ignored by churches, or handed over to those who read it as a tract about the end times. Such readings distort the book greatly. It was written amidst fierce persecution by the Roman Empire, in the period when the Emperor Nero was rumored to have burned Christians at his garden parties. Because of that, it was written in a kind of code, so as to slip past the eyes of the censors. It's like a poem smuggled past the Gestapo, or a novel smuggled out of Siberia. And so Babylon, in that text, is a veiled reference to the decadence, the wantonness, the scandal, and the sheer inhumanity of the Empire in that moment. That's why, at the end of the litany recording the fall of Babylon that we read this morning, a great cry goes out of heaven - Hallelujah is what they say - three separate times in fact. They celebrate the destruction of Babylon because they had been freed from a reality that had persecuted, enslaved, demeaned, and demoralized them - distorted their basic humanity, in other words. It's worth noting that a few verses prior to the

ones I selected, one of the principal outrages of Babylon in Revelation - or Rome in this case, is that it trafficked in human lives. So in this regard, celebrating the fall of Babylon among the residents of heaven is not unlike both captive and freed African Americans celebrating the fall of the Confederacy in 1865. *Revelation*, in all of its wild imagery, is an ethical and political inquiry into how one might live humanly amidst such a reality. The answer, the text seems to suggest, is to trust that by enacting the truth of one's humanity, the lies and distortions of realities such as Babylon, wherever and however they might manifest, will be unmasked and overcome. It is that third principle, of the freedom to enact our humanity, each in our own way, but always in relation to the humanity of other, and always amidst the realities of alienation, that enables us to guard against the worst excesses of fundamentalism, which would deprive us of all such freedom, and which ultimately falls right in line with the kind of power exerted by Babylon in *Revelation*.

So far I've offered principles and formulas, but in closing, I'd like to touch down upon the earth, and share a story about one who lived these sorts of principles in an exemplary way. This is a person who affirmed faith as a public act. This is a person who understood that there is no neutral ground on which to stand, embracing the necessity of public ethics. And this is a person who was forced to discern, from moment to moment, how best to live humanly amidst institutions, laws, and processes that fostered alienation and estrangement in human life. The person to whom I'm referring is Pauli Murray. Murray is someone I didn't know much about prior to six years ago, when Yale named one of its residential colleges after them - and I use gender neutral pronouns deliberately, along with male and female pronouns. I'll say why in just a bit. Murray was African American, and was born in 1910. Her mother died young, and her father was murdered in an act of racist violence. And so Murray went to live with an aunt in North Carolina, where he burned with a unique intellectual brilliance. By the 1930's they were deeply involved in the civil rights movement, long before many people, especially in the white community, knew there was such a thing. Murray fought to gain admission to the University of North Carolina, but was denied, because of her race. They fought for admission to Harvard, but were denied because of gender. He wound up first at Howard and then at Yale Law School, going on to write a book that Thurgood Marshall described as the Bible for civil rights litigators.

By the 60's, Murray was working with Dr. King and with Bayard Rustin, but he complained that the civil rights movement was dominated by men, and that it didn't account for the contributions of black women. It wasn't long before they helped to co-found the National Organization for Women, or NOW. But that wasn't all. Faith had always been an animating part of Murray's life, and so in the 70's, they went to seminary. Murray became the first Black woman, as she was then perceived, to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. After Murray's death in 1985, his papers revealed that despite passing as a woman for most of her life - though often being mistaken for a man - Murray had often questioned his gender and sexual identity. As early as the 1930's, she had inquired about hormone treatments. During that same decade, he had requested exploratory surgery to investigate his reproductive organs. He was denied that gender affirming medical care. Nevertheless, Murray found ways of living freely, openly, and exuberantly within a culture that denied her right to exist on all fronts - as Black, as a woman, and as genderqueer. Murray's is an exemplary life of faith lived in public - forthrightly, politically, humanly - amidst so much estrangement and alienation. She - he - they - are someone we need to study, and learn from, as we navigate the questions of our own day. Rev. Dr. Murray teaches us, in the words of the Apostle Paul, how not to be conformed to the ways of this world, but to be constantly transformed by the renewing of our minds.

I would have us all willingly embrace the public nature of faith. I would have us all not shy away from, but lean into the political, as a means of asking how we might best organize our lives together. And I would have us all embrace the freedom that comes from following not a rigid system, but a question, one with answers that shift across time: how do we live humanly amidst the Fall? How might we live humanly, amidst so much estrangement? The life of Pauli Murray provides but one exemplary answer. You must provide another.