

## Isaiah 58:1-9

Shout out, do not hold back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.  
Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practised righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgements,  
they delight to draw near to God.  
‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’  
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,  
and oppress all your workers.  
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.  
Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?  
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

## Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White Where Faith and Politics Meet

We Methodists have a reputation as being political. When I think of Methodists involved in Social Justice Issues, I think of people like Frances Willard, a Methodist who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was involved the fight to outlaw the sale and consumption of alcohol and also in the struggle to gain the right for women to vote. I think of Harry Ward, a Methodist pastor and union activist who was the first president of the ACLU and author of the Social Creed which served as the outline for our Methodist Social Principles which advocated for universal healthcare, a living wage, and an end to child labor. We Methodists should be proud of such people who labored for justice for so many people, people who were controversial in their day, accused of being self-righteous, of being socialists, of rocking the boat of culture.

Of course I also think of John Wesley, who was a staunch advocate for prison reform and for the abolition of slavery, who like Frances Willard and Harry Ward enjoyed some success in his efforts to effect political change in his day. Then of course, there's Jesus, who brashly proclaimed that the old political order was coming to an end and the Kingdom of God had arrived, who declared himself to be unlike the rulers of this world who seek power for their own glory; Jesus said that the greatest among us are the ones who serve, and he lived his life for God's glory. He healed the sick – once spent all night healing the sick – what does that tell us about his beliefs on health care? I like how Philip Yancey describes his developing understanding of Jesus...

"I first got acquainted with Jesus when I was a child, singing 'Jesus Loves Me' in Sunday School, addressing bedtime prayers to 'Dear Lord Jesus'...I associated Jesus with Kool-Aid and sugar cookies and gold stars for good attendance....Jesus, I later found, bore little resemblance to the Mister Rogers figure I had met in Sunday School, and was remarkably unlike the person I had studied in Bible College. For one thing, he was far less tame."

(Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*)

But strangely enough people like Jesus and John Wesley were not known for upsetting the political order; instead it was the religious order that had a hard time with them. Jesus had harsh words for the leaders of the Temple and the Pharisees who were misleading the people, but he healed the Roman Centurion's slave, he didn't tell people to not pay their taxes, and he told them to walk the extra mile, carrying a Roman's rucksack. And John Wesley did not advocate for a new government in England. It was not Wesley's political activism that made people so angry at him. It was not his passion about reforming social institutions and promoting humane treatment of prisoners and ending slavery that caused people to throw rocks at him; it was rather his preaching about Jesus Christ and about God's love and grace that caused people to hate him. It wasn't the political authorities per se who labeled Wesley and his Methodists as troublemakers. Rather it was the church that did so! Why did they hate Wesley so? Because he was waking people up to the Holy Spirit! And he didn't discriminate who he was preaching to and where he was preaching it. In Wesley's day the average priest lived a rather secular lifestyle and had lost a sense of concern for the people of his parish, who in turn had lost respect for their priests. So people were not going to church, and no one was going *out* to bring in these lost sheep *except for people like John Wesley who were inspired by the Holy Spirit* to reach out to the lost souls by any means necessary. And the established Church labeled him a dangerous man with strange ideas and practices – these Methodists were too loud and too uncontrollable, and so they were a threat to the established church and the way things were supposed to be done. You weren't supposed to preach out in the fields.

And these small groups that kept growing in number – what were they doing behind closed doors? I heard they were having *Love Feasts!* What was that?!!

The point I'd like to make is that the social reform movements that we may associate with a lot of famous Methodists were secondary missions. Jesus' main goal was to bring people into the Kingdom of God, to show them the true nature of God in all his love and forgiveness and grace, and get them to change their own lives first and foremost. "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is upon us," declared Jesus. Wesley likewise went to the common folk telling them there is a better way; God can change your life. You can live piously, righteously as an individual. And we can't forget that component in our Christian faith. There were a lot of social reformers around during the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution, and consequently there was a lot of chaos and violence and death. Our hearts need to be wrapped in God's love so that guns and bombs are our last options when it comes to social reform.

Today we start a worship series called *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, and the reason I chose to do this series is because of the divide that I see not only in politics and the church and the need for the church first and foremost to find a common voice because I believe that the Church is this nation's best hope for preserving and instilling values in this culture, values that guide our politics and make us the great nation that we are. Christians are essential to this process because we are ambassadors of Jesus Christ who has begun the work of building God's kingdom in the world.

And I don't know about you, but I see a lot in common between the world John Wesley lived in and the world we live in. How many of you think that people are losing interest in the Church? How many of you think that people are not being reached with the true message of Jesus Christ, a message that starts by recognizing our need to get our own house in order and then work to get our own communities in order, and then project our values into our laws and government policies? I'm not talking about dismantling that wall that separates Church from State; I'm not talking about policies that favor one religion over another, because that in itself would be a very un-Christian policy. I'm talking about issues of justice and mercy that prevent people from having a voice or having their basic biological needs met AND I'm also talking about family values and traditions that sustain our sense of community and trust of one another, and both are important.

And I would bet that, as Christians, we would agree on most major issues that our nation and our world are dealing with. We should agree on those issues because we have one Lord and Savior whose words are for the most part rather unambiguous. Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Simple. Someone asked Jesus, "Who's my neighbor?" Jesus answered, "The guy over there that you don't like very much; *THAT'S your neighbor*. We may not like the answers Jesus gives us, but he gives them nonetheless.

Which brings me to my next point: It's not what we disagree about politically as Christians that is the biggest threat to our nation or to our world. Rather it's our failure to bring our faith into politics that poses the biggest threat.

We fail to bring our faith into politics when we think of our faith as nothing more than fire insurance, as belief in a set of doctrines that we imagine will qualify us for a pleasant afterlife. We fail to bring our faith into politics when we deceive ourselves into thinking that God has nothing to say to our world, than he is simply a gatekeeper to heaven.

And just as it's wrong to create some dichotomy between our faith and our politics, so too is it wrong to let our politics shape our faith. Adolph Hitler spoke of God of being on the side of the German people, and it wasn't a big stretch to go from there to the belief that God hated the Jews. And as horrible an example as that is, we are guilty of doing this all the time, of using the Bible to justify racism or sexism or any of a variety of 'isms' that are all intended to put ourselves and our needs above others or their needs. And we may do this in the name of God, or Jesus, or Christianity.

And so I come back to my original point, that as Christians our priority needs to be getting ourselves right with God – repenting, and changing our ways. Or as the prophet Micah put it, “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” When our hearts are in the right place, our actions will follow, and the Spirit will give us a voice to speak and act on behalf of those who suffer. May God grant us humility and the will to walk humbly with him. Amen.