

# "The Religious Left?"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister  
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, November 7, 2010

Which party would Jesus join if he were an American today? The Republican Party, the Democratic Party, the Tea Party? Some people think they know. I don't know about you, but I'm pretty fed up with people who think they know how Jesus would vote! It's the height of arrogance and the fruit of much hypocrisy. A church should never attach itself to a political party, and no political party should attach itself to a church. If you ask me, if Jesus himself were running for office, I doubt he'd even win.

Author Becky Garrison said it best in her book Red & Blue God, Black & Blue Church. "Even though Christians talk about following the will of Christ, if he were on the ballot today would we vote for him?" Well, for starters, his message is geared toward those "undesirables" who probably aren't even registered to vote and may not have voter ID cards in Oklahoma. Also, that business of separating the sheep that are eligible to vote for Christ from the hoards of unregistered goats represents a pollster's nightmare. And let's face it; Jesus can't spin worth a darn. He tells it like it is and doesn't give a rip who he offends. How can you have a candidate who can't even be trusted to go to a fund-raising breakfast and behave in front of those all-important special interest groups needed to finance the cost of mounting a modern political campaign?

Now let's examine his staff. His campaign manager looks like one of those crazy homeless guys I see preaching in Times Square, and his female companion has a checkered past that would make Monica Lewinsky blush. He hangs out with tax collectors, drunkards, and a host of unsavory characters. And last but not least, his trusted disciples, the guys he appointed to key leadership positions, make snafus almost every time they accompany their leader in public. Get this—he can't even get any respect in his own hometown (sort of like Al Gore in 2000).

No. If Jesus stepped into the Republican National Committee or Democratic National Committee headquarters, both Karl Rove and Democratic head honcho Howard Dean would show him the door for sure. There's no way they'd even remotely consider his candidacy as leader of the free world but then again, Jesus made it clear that his kingdom lay elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> And while members of both parties would love to claim Jesus (or God) as one of their own, doing so is, to put it politely, blasphemous. Anytime in American history when we see a religion hitching its star to the wagon of a particular political party, it is bad for the state and usually even worse for the church.

At one time or another, most of us have seen the bumper sticker distributed by Jerry Falwell's followers that says, "Vote Christian" and the people who have these stickers are very clear what they mean. For them, to "Vote Christian" means to vote against abortion, stem-cell research, gay marriage and a small host of other controversial issues. None of which, by the way, were ever mentioned by Jesus and none of these social issues can be found anywhere in the Gospels. You'd think that if they were so central to the faith, he would've mentioned them. Instead Jesus focused mostly on helping the poor. In fact, the Bible has over two thousand verses about helping the poor; more than any other single subject. Like Ezekiel 16:49, the passage homophobes don't like to deal with; it reads, "Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy." But forgetting it's the single most talked-about issue in the scriptures and forgetting the thousands of verses about helping the poor, and that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality, abortion or stem cells; still, each election season, certain churches hand out voter guides that rate the candidates based on their positions on these controversial and, may I say, unbiblical issues. They've come to be known as wedge issues, because they serve to create a wedge to divide up the electorate. The proponents of these wedge issues portray it as a battle between people of faith and their enemies, which is ridiculous.

Let's look at abortion. The question is not are you for it or against it. The question is do you get rid of abortion by outlawing it? If you look at the statistics of women over thirty, there were the same numbers of women having abortions in 1950 as there are today. That means that even when abortion was illegal, there were the same numbers as there are today... when you look at women over thirty. This tells us that making it illegal does not end abortion. What's different today is the number of teenage abortions.

So, knowing that making it illegal won't end abortion, let's look at the economic issues. I heard Rev. Tony Campolo talk about this and he's a Baptist minister. He said let's imagine a seventeen-year-old girl who's living in poverty. These days, that's talking about millions of Americans. Over forty-three million Americans are living in poverty according to the last census. You're seventeen and you get pregnant. You find a job working minimum wage; that is, if you can find a job. But let's assume she can. On minimum wage you cannot buy food, pay rent, and take care of yourself, let alone a baby. There's no medical coverage so she'd have to pay the hospital bills if she's going to have the baby. We don't provide child care in this country; she'll have to figure out how to pay for that. And we wonder why she has an abortion.

Studies show that when you make it economically feasible for mothers to have their babies, most do. Most abortions in this country are not out of emotional convenience or propriety; most are out of economic necessity. My point is that both sides of the debate are half right. Life is sacred and economics is the major issue. Being a religious person is about being able to honor what's right in both parties' positions; that's why it's a moral failure to align a religion with a political party. The number one issue outlined for Christians in the Bible is that helping the poor is obligatory.

Here's a description of Matthew, Chapter 25 offered by my late colleague, Dr. Forrest Church; he wrote:

Jesus tells his disciples that when we die there's a quiz. The questions, by the way, are not "Who is the second person in the trinity? Should women be allowed to be priests?" or "During your lifetime were you sufficiently militant in your abhorrence of high taxes, homosexuality, stem-cell research, Islam and abortion?" According to Jesus in the book of Matthew, he assured his disciples, "If you have done these things to the very least of these, our brothers and sisters, you have done them to me." The questions are these: Did you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and visit those in prison? Get them correct, Jesus says, and we will know heaven.<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus was not really ambiguous about his priorities or about what he thought ours should be. And that is why it is so disappointing in a time when health care costs are crippling, public education is failing miserably, hunger and homelessness plague millions, unemployment is astronomical, foreclosures and fear of foreclosure are everywhere, the country is in a perpetual and economically crippling war, and most Americans are afraid that our country's best days may be in the past. Despite all of this, the way that the religious right has chosen to participate in politics is through creating a litmus test on a narrow set of wedge issues. And it is not only bad for politics; it is bad for the church.

In a study just published by Harvard's Robert Putnum and David Campbell of Notre Dame, they've discovered why the fastest-growing religious group in America is people who have no religion.<sup>iii</sup> In the last decade this group has gone from seven to seventeen percent of Americans. They discovered that this group is made up primarily of younger Americans. Today almost twenty percent of young Americans say they have no religion. And the number-one reason they cite for leaving the church is politics. These young people say they have been turned off to religion by conservative politics. They see religion as intolerant, judgmental, hypocritical, and homophobic. They also found that the lack of church membership did not mean that these young people did not believe in God or consider themselves spiritual. On the contrary, most

believe in God or consider themselves spiritual, they simply do not see churches as places where God and spirit reside and the primary reason they cited is politics.

Their research showed that if churches want to have a role in the lives of young people they need to become less politically partisan. And if the Republican Party wants to draw more young people they need to stop being seen as aligned with conservative religious dogmas about issues like homosexuality. And on the other side of this issue, the political left has to find ways to tap the spiritual hunger for meaning among the American people.

Rabbi Michael Lerner said in an interview in the Boston Globe that:

Many secularist believe that voters who side with the right against their own economic interests are deluded or dumb or both. But what those critics miss is that many people get to the religious right because it's the only voice willing to challenge the de-spiritualization of daily life, to call for a life that is driven by a higher purpose than money, and to provide actual experiences of supportive community for those whose daily life is suffused with alienation and spiritual loneliness. The left cannot seem to talk about love or kindness or generosity without feeling that it's violated its commitment to a scientific form of rationalism.

Lerner's sentiments are much the same as what Steven Carter said over a decade ago in his book Culture of Disbelief. He wrote, "There's a perception that taking religion seriously in our secular culture is something that only wild-eyed zealots do."

Another thing that many on the political left are confused about is that the Tea Party is not a religious party. Religion is not the driver or the glue for this new political phenomenon. Yet many political liberals don't get it. The Tea Party has rallied a number of constituencies which include some religious people, even some racist people; but neither of these are the primary issue that binds them together. The one universal in the Tea Party is the desire to stop runaway spending and deficits. It's an economic issue, not a religious wedge issue. And by purposefully avoiding being co-opted by wedge issues, the Tea Party has effectively brought together some disparate groups. As the saying goes, "Politics makes strange bedfellows."

And it doesn't matter if you're like me and disagree with almost everything Glenn Beck has to say; he's right that there is a deep spiritual hunger in America for meaning. Whether you're politically left or right or ambidextrous; whether you're religiously left or right or in between: deep down in the American psyche there is a hunger for deeper meaning.

Now it is a huge mistake to try to discover that meaning in the political system. The meaning comes from religious values or what we might call our sense of the ultimate. What some call

God, others call good. Yet if you're a politician on either side of the aisle, it is also a mistake not to build on Americans' passion for meaning and their spiritual hunger for wholeness.

I am not suggesting a religious left be gathered as a mirror of the religious right. Religions that become politically partisan become anemic. Religions becoming partisan politically are driving people away from church. The religious right is driving people right out of the church. What I'm suggesting is that religions be religions and offer among other things, moral critique, and criteria for society, but not in politically partisan ways; and that politicians, especially on the left, stop being so afraid to speak from their religious convictions.

Barack Obama has helped the American Left to become more comfortable with religious sentiment and that is one of the reasons that the right continues to label him as a Muslim, to try to deny that his positions could possibly be influenced by Christian values. The danger in American politics is not religious sentiment; the danger is religious extremism. The danger is not being open to religious inspiration; it is being blinded by religious sectarianism. The danger is not religious influence in politics. It's if one religion or religious perspective is allowed to dominate the agenda. The views of Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Atheists should all be welcomed and heard in the halls of government, but religions and churches themselves need to rise above that fray. And at its best, religion transcends partisan politics.

In his book Faith & Politics, former Republican Senator John Danforth, describes one way that religion does this in our nation's capitol.

At 8 o'clock each Wednesday morning, a dozen or so senators gather in an interior room on the first floor of the United States Capitol for the weekly prayer breakfast. It's an intimate hour together, with no public or media presence. The senators are Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. Some are regular in their attendance; others come only occasionally (kind of like you). After breakfast, the leader for the day's meeting, who was chosen the previous week, speaks for 5 to 10 minutes on the subject of his or her choice, then opens up the discussion to the other senators. At the end of the hour, the leader asks a colleague to offer a closing prayer. Senators who attend the Wednesday breakfast are from a variety of religious traditions, so the discussions are neither narrowly sectarian nor heavily theological. Instead, they tend to be quite personal, touching on life experiences of the sort that bind diverse senators together.

Danforth has spoken on topics that include the physical exhaustion of demanding work and the embarrassment of being wrong, because these are common to everyone, certainly to all members of the Senate. Feelings of exhaustion and embarrassment are the kinds of subjects appropriate for discussion at a prayer breakfast. Not discussed at these meetings are the contentious issues of the day, where members are divided by party or political philosophy or regional interests. Fighting among one another over those issues is the everyday life of

senators. An hour after leaving the prayer breakfast, members will be in committee meetings wrangling about taxes or spending or how to confront terrorism. "Politics is contentious," he tells us, "but for a brief time each week, religion brings otherwise combative senators together." As demonstrated by the Senate prayer breakfasts, religion has the capacity to draw people together.

And if this church of All Souls were to identify itself with one political party, it would be an enormous mistake. When a religion hitches its star to a political party or visa versa, they both get corrupted in the process. May you be deeply engaged in the politics of our nation. But may you put your faith somewhere higher. There is a place beyond left and right, beyond liberal and conservative, beyond believer and non-believer, beyond red and blue, black and white, rich & poor. Some call it the Promised Land. Some call it Zion. Some call it Mecca or the Kingdom of Heaven. Some call it the seeds of real peace on earth. Here on the corner of Twenty-ninth and Peoria, we call it All Souls Unitarian Church. I'll meet you in that special place, right here, every Sunday, and every chance I get. Each week when we gather in this sanctuary, we represent a powerful, living example of human reconciliation and understanding that rises above the divisions that so often plague the world outside. While your faith in Congress, or government, may be at an all- time low, I hope your faith in the ground upon which we stand in this church remains high, because where we are now is holy ground.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Garrison, Becky. Red And Blue God, Black And Blue Church: Eyewitness Accounts Of How American Churches Are Hijacking Jesus, Bagging The Beatitudes, And Worshiping The Almighty Dollar. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, (2006): 50.

<sup>ii</sup> "The Greatest Liberal of Them All", a sermon preached by Rev. Forrest Church at All Souls Church, New York City, January 6, 2008.

<sup>iii</sup> Putnam, Robert and Campbell, David E., "Walking Away From Church" Tulsa World Newspaper, 31 October, 2010, G3.