

Sermon Notes for 2/21/16 (Lent 2)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Jeremiah 26:8-15

Theme: **COMPASSIONATE ENGAGEMENT AMID POLITICAL FIRESTORMS**

The Point: God calls us to speak truth even (and especially!) when it is not politically popular.

Introduction: The theme for today's message was chosen several weeks ago, long before the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. But it has not been by accident that his death almost immediately ignited a political firestorm that has lit up the warning towers on both sides (all sides?) of the political landscape in our land. Of course, we have all heard more than once the caution that we are not to address in public which two topics? Yes, politics and religion. And now I am going to try to bring a word from God that speaks to both. We will see that our Lord calls us to **COMPASSIONATE ENGAGEMENT AMID POLITICAL FIRESTORMS**.

In the Old Testament reading from Jeremiah's long book of prophecy, Jeremiah encounters a political firestorm. Judah and Jerusalem were being surrounded by enemies, and within a short time the country would be utterly devastated. Of course, "the powers that be" did not want to face this reality. We read that the priests and the prophets and lots of the people of Jerusalem laid hold of Jeremiah and berated him for saying that Jerusalem would be attacked and desolate, deserted, demolished. They labeled him as traitorous, unpatriotic, and worthy of death because of these dire prophecies.

Jeremiah's simple defense was this: "It is the Lord who sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard." If he had spoken words that were unpalatable and difficult, it was only because he was speaking what the Lord had given him to speak. He could not hold back. As Jeremiah himself put it (Jer. 20:9), "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." He had to speak that which the Lord had given to him. We too must speak what our Lord gives.

Jeremiah was seen as a political rebel and even as a traitor since he was perceived as being anti-Jerusalem and anti-Jewish. Of course, Jeremiah himself was a Jewish man and would probably have preferred (according to his own flesh) to be left out of the loop when it came to speaking judgment to his own countrymen. He did not enjoy being a lightning rod prophet. His first reaction to God's call was that he was too young, and he is sometimes referred to as "The Weeping Prophet," due to his frequent tirades. Jeremiah was the author of the biblical book of Lamentations, a serious grouping of complaints about suffering, written after the destruction that Babylon wrought on Jerusalem at the end of the 7th (and beginning of the 6th) century BC. He spoke to God plainly and complainingly, as (e.g.) "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" (Jer. 15:18) He did not flinch from laying his complaints before Yahweh.

Kyle Yates described Jeremiah's life this way: "Misunderstood by his own family, opposed by priest and prophet, shunned by his people, his life was a tragic experience. Even though he complained and questioned God's treatment of him, he continued to urge his fellow citizens to turn to God for cleansing and deliverance." Jeremiah must have felt like a loner much of the time. This prophet bore the burden of being ordered by God not to marry or have children, to symbolize the barren times ahead for the nation – but imagine how that must have shaped his life experience! Oh, I suspect there must have been periods of time when Jeremiah was glad not to have a family to worry about – but I imagine that even more pronounced was the prolonged disappointment of never being able to serve as husband or father.

He was a friend of King Josiah and appreciated Josiah's attempts to reform Israel's religious and worship life. But Josiah was killed in battle when he tried to head off the Egyptians who were coming to fight for

the Assyrians against the Babylonians. Thereafter, Jeremiah became a pariah in the Jewish court. When the Babylonians defeated Egypt, then Assyria, and then swept through Israel and besieged Jerusalem, Jeremiah counseled surrender to the new world power, Babylon – you can well imagine how popular that suggestion may have been. He was imprisoned several times – even thrown into a pit and left for dead.

Jeremiah knew the reality of political firestorms. And yet he continued to proclaim the message of God to the people. His life's theme was compassionate engagement. He saw his life's work as getting the people of Israel engaged with the Word and the truth of the Lord. He spoke words of judgment and rebuke, but always with the desire and intent to lead people back to the mercy and forgiveness of God. The road of repentance was what they needed to take. After all, he also penned the words from Yahweh, "They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. . . For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sin no more." God's greatest desire for Israel (and for you and me) is to welcome us into His embrace as we forsake our sin and seek His face.

When it comes to the political sphere, many people seem to prefer the biting, sarcastic, thoughtless word over the word that is compassionate and thoughtful and engaging. I have been counted in that camp too often, and perhaps you have been, too. This calls for repentance. Minnesota has long been counted one of the most politically engaged states, and I praise God that this may also be part of our Lutheran heritage working its way out in the public square. This being a presidential election year, there is even more reason for the people of God to be actively involved in the political process. We have recently received a letter from our MNS District encouraging people to be part of the political process, including the caucuses which will be held just nine days from today.

I thank God that we live in a country where our voices can actually count for something in the public square. We have the opportunity to elect leaders who reflect the kinds of values that we want to have enacted in our laws and reflected in public policy. Of course, it is rare that a politician will embody all the values that I would prefer to have in the mix publicly. That is one reason we need to be getting aware of our politicians' stances, so that we can make faithful, informed, God-pleasing decisions when it comes to casting our votes. And it is a reminder that, whoever happens to be in office, it is still our responsibility to speak a prophetic word as that is needed to bring God's will to the forefront of public policy.

We also need to be aware that an active political stance may put us at odds with many of those around us, some even as close as our own family and friends. Just like Jeremiah, we may find ourselves forced to speak against some of the "sacred cows" of our own established government or society. But that is only good patriotism also. For a true patriot does not want his fellowmen to live under God's final judgment.

The Concordia Self-Study Bible says about Jeremiah: "Actually, of course, his advice against rebellion marked him as a true patriot, a man who loved his countrymen too much to stand by silently and watch them destroy themselves. By warning them to submit and not rebel, Jeremiah was revealing God's will to them – always the most sensible prospect under any circumstances. . . Called to the unhappy task of announcing the destruction of the kingdom of Judah (thoroughly corrupted by the long and evil reign of Manasseh and only superficially affected by Josiah's efforts at reform), it was Jeremiah's commission to lodge God's indictment against his people and proclaim the end of an era." Revealing God's will to another person is always the most sensible prospect – far more sensible than parroting the political clichés or trumpeting our own abilities or using jargon to cover over our evil intentions or playing on the fears of people for our own purposes.

Quoting from the District letter that I mentioned earlier: "Of course, the Church should never tell its members or anyone else who to vote for, and we will not in this election. What the Church has always done and will continue to do is to urge its members to be good stewards of their rights as citizens and

participate in the process. In addition, the Church has also offered its counsel on a small number of specific issues to which the Bible speaks clearly and unambiguously, and which directly impact our ability to proclaim the gospel in our sanctuaries as well as in the public square. For us, the members of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, there are four general areas that meet these standards and to which we have spoken publicly over the years. These include 1) the life issues (speaking out against abortion and physician assisted suicide); 2) the issues surrounding marriage, family and sexuality (witnessing to God's good design of marriage as one man and one woman and the meaningfulness of our maleness and femaleness); 3) religious freedom issues (insisting that our religious liberty is the greatest of our rights and cannot be swept aside whenever anyone makes a claim of personal autonomy); and finally, 4) parental choice in education (advocating for the right of parents to choose from the full range of schools available, including religious schools, without being financially penalized by the State for that decision)."

Jesus Himself had some powerful words of rebuke for the government of his day. In today's Gospel, He calls King Herod a "fox" and rejects the call to hide out from Herod's wrath. Joseph and Mary had hidden in Egypt from another Herod's wrath when Jesus was just a toddler. But now the time is approaching for Jesus to complete His work of suffering and dying for us, and He will even stand before King Herod in His mock kingly robe. He will refuse to do Herod's request for a miraculous sign, and He will die for you and me and for Herod as well. He spoke to Jerusalem as the city that killed the prophets and stoned those sent to it by God. But He didn't speak these words with anger and bitterness in His voice. He spoke it trembling with tears, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" He desired for that group and nation – and for every group and nation in the world then and now – that they would welcome His embrace and His protection and His grace and His forgiveness.

Whatever our political identities, you and I are called as people of God to live out His call to love others as we love ourselves. That means spending our lives in compassionate engagement, also with those who are on the outside of our political processes. As we care for the immigrant and the outsider, as we visit the hospitalized and imprisoned, as we lobby for the rights of those who are impoverished and mistreated, we are living out our call to be people who serve and follow Christ, our Servant-King. He did not come to set up a political party, nor to give His approval to one or another of those parties or governments. He came to bear witness to the truth, and all who are of the truth listen to Him. He came to serve, not to be served, and in His serving to give His life for the life of the world. And we are called to trust Him and to live by confidence in His promises as we give our lives for the sake of those who need to know Him.

We ought not to conclude this consideration without a word of encouragement to those who may be called to be more active members of the body politic by serving or at least running for public office. We Christians need to be included in the group of those willing to bear the yoke of political office, unless we want governance to be done entirely by those who run by different values and motives. Let us encourage our brothers and sisters who seek to serve in this difficult arena – and to commit to pray for them especially as they bear that burden.

Conclusion: God calls us to speak truth even (and especially!) when it is not politically popular. I came across this quote from Justice Antonin Scalia the other day, a fitting capstone on today's conversation: "God assumed from the beginning that the wise of the world would view Christians as fools. . . and He has not been disappointed. . . Have the courage to have your wisdom regarded as stupidity. Be fools for Christ. And have the courage to suffer the contempt of the sophisticated world." As we stand for the truth embodied in Jesus Christ, we too may suffer the contempt of the sophisticated world. But it will be well worth the price, knowing that in the eternal courts we will be vindicated by the Spirit of the living God and will live forever with our Savior, in that place where tears and mourning and pain – and politics – and death itself shall be no more. In the strong name of Jesus, AMEN!