

## The Politics of Jesus

(Luke 4:14-21)

January 23, 2022

Jesus has a politics. Shocking to our senses? Denying that Jesus was political is a serious enterprise for some. These deniers are a subtle bunch. They even use words of Jesus to say, “See, he’s not political.” Let’s clear this little bit of confusion before we move forward. Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews.” A bit later Jesus says, “My kingdom is not from this world.” There’s the statement. Preachers think that proves Jesus was not political and that his kingdom is spiritual and heavenly. Pilate understood what Jesus was saying, why can’t we? Pilate says, “So you are a king?” Jesus is a king, and his kingdom is not some spiritualized world. His kingdom is not another form of Rome. Jesus’s kingdom is an alternative to the kingdoms of this world. King and kingdom – those are political words. Jesus has a politics.

You may still be skeptical, but there is a crucial passage in the gospels where Jesus makes it clear that his politics are different from the politics of the world: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.<sup>26</sup> It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant,<sup>27</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave;<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” There’s the politics of Jesus. He always contrasts his politics with the politics of the Gentiles – the other kingdoms of the world. In case you are still not sure, here’s another bit of evidence. Jesus says, “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’<sup>32</sup> For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.<sup>33</sup> But strive first for the kingdom of God<sup>[l]</sup> and his<sup>[m]</sup> righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” The politics of Jesus are not riddled with greed, controlled by money, big donors, and billionaires. This is the politics of Jesus: striving for the kingdom of God and righteousness.

Let me take one more example to push you a little. Jesus says,<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’<sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you .... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you

have? .... Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Again, here is the politics of Jesus.

I think that we are not so much confused about whether or not Jesus has a politics as we don't like the politics of Jesus. The politics of Jesus are too hard. I suspect we would rather argue about our politics until we are red in the face than embrace the politics of Jesus.

When I say that Jesus has a politics, I don't mean that Jesus would have led the January 6<sup>th</sup> foray into the capitol. I don't mean Jesus would have led the Black Lives Matter protests that led to violence. “Jesus was killed because he embodied a politics that threatened all worldly regimes based on the fear of death” (Hauerwas, *Working with Words*, 121). If Jesus were to appear on State Street, I think we would all be surprised by his moves, his platform, his causes. Sometimes I wish he would show up and straighten out this mess, but that's a pipe dream. The last time he was here, he had a rough time and now would be no different. Last time all the political parties came together in once accord to kill Jesus, and it would happen again today.

Rather than following Jesus, a lot of folks merely want to use Jesus to advance an issue, make a case, or push a cause. In the USA everyone wants to use Jesus. The key word here is “use,” as in “use” Jesus to get their way, “use” Jesus to win political races, “use” Jesus to secure political power. Jesus is the King of Kings; you don't get to “use” him. I really don't know if we are on Jesus' side. I don't know. I do know he is concerned with peace, righteousness, truth. What we need to ask: “Are we on Jesus' side?”

I am convinced that the politics of Jesus is about the social, the material, the bodily. Jesus figures the gospel as haptic and bodily. Why else are all those bodies being healed in the gospels? The politics of Jesus are, in a word, bodily. “At its most broadly productive, a move to the body engages the multiple scientific, musical, or religious perspectives that include bodies, rhythms, and movements, none of which can be disentangled from sociocultural or economic forces, but all of which bear importantly on how” bodies are treated (Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies*, 2).

The politics of Jesus does business with bodies – abused, mistreated, starved, thirsty, weak, depressed, persecuted, segregated, denied, hurt, diseased, disturbed bodies. And it involves compassion and empathy and

healing. “The gospel is the proclamation of a new age begun through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That gospel has a political form. It is embodied in a church that is required to be always ready to give hospitality to the stranger” (Hauerwas, 123). Never forget that we are the body of Christ. Body? Get it? Material, fleshly, bodies. This is not about abstract beliefs and political debates; it’s about how we are treating bodies. In my best judgment this is the politics of Jesus. And that is a serious problem for us, all of us. The problem with the politics of Jesus is that Jesus couldn’t get elected. The consultants would want to change his outfit, his hairstyle and make him wear those hideous red ties. The advertisers would want him to make outrageous statements to get attention. The political gurus would want to tailor his speeches for popular consumption, dumb down his message to the fourth-grade level.

As Seth Myer puts it, “It’s time for a closer look!”

Jesus says, “proclaim good news to the poor.” More than half the crowd left at these words. Ears perk up cause economics has entered the game. This is economics, and God knows, everyone has opinions about economics. Our politicians do economics the way my uncle played craps at the casino. He thought he had a system to beat the house. When he won, he would visit my dad and brag about how much he won and how his system worked. When he lost, he didn’t visit dad, but he persisted in believing that his system worked. How many politicians have only one formula: “Take the Method (as they see it, there is only one) and try it. If it fails, deny its failure and try it again and again and again .... But above all keep trying the same thing” (McElvaine, *The Great Depression*).

Proclaiming good news to poor people? Good news to the poor: Food on the table, heat in a house, a job with a living wage, transportation, good education, health care. I wish Congress operated like every church brunch for the homeless, every clothes closet, every food pantry, but you will not get that through Congress. They are too smart to fall for this. They operate on the principle of scarcity. They help up to a point and then they presume and perpetuate a world of scarcity and want – a world where there is never “enough.” They know that good news for the poor would mean enough food, enough shelter, enough money to pay the rent. They know that good news for the poor would include all the poor including poor white people in West Virginia and poor African Americans in Schenectady. All these poor bodies. 44 million on food stamps. All those poor bodies. It’s so overwhelming.

Then Jesus says, “To release the captives.” That doesn’t have a chance at passing. The District Attorney’s Association has a powerful lobby in DC and they would kill this bill in committee. If all the prisoners were released, what would criminal attorneys do? We can’t even agree to let people out of the “joint” serving 10 years for smoking a joint. How could we ever reform our penal system when we still have capital punishment? Will Campbell said that if you wanted to get a man executed in Mississippi all you needed was a jury full of Baptist deacons. How could we release the prisoners when building prisons is a growth industry in the USA?

Next Jesus says, “Recover the sight of the blind.” This is Jesus’ education plank. Doesn’t stand a chance with so many people attacking science and history standards in our schools. The anti-science movement threatens our position as the leading scientific country in the world. America has always had a scientific soul – innovation, bold experimentation, invention, persistence. That soul is now threatened by what some Americans are calling “freedom.” I prefer innovation to ignorance, trying something new to digging in with a stubborn ideology, the next thing to the same old thing. Speaking of freedom, Jesus says, “To let the oppressed go free.” That’s liberation theology and if you listen to enough members in Congress – there are no oppressed people left in this country. They are saying, “We had women’s liberation for the feminists. We had Civil Rights for African Americans. We have gay marriage for the gays and lesbians and rights for transgender people. We are even letting transgenders play women’s sports. What more do these people want?” Freedom has become a scary experience in the USA, especially on passenger jets where more than 5,300 people caused disruptions last year and an American passenger got out of his seat to punch an attendant because she accidentally bumped into him while walking by in first class. People are on edge. People are reaching for guns. Anti-Semitism is on the rise – never a good sign in any civilization. Someone mistakenly said, “There are good people on both sides.” No, when it comes to violence, there are evil people on both sides. You can’t attack violence by arguing that your violence is righteous violence. Hell, the Confederates thought God was on their side.

Then Jesus announces: “To proclaim the year of Jubilee.” Do you know that Jubilee was commanded by God to happen every 50 years for a restoring of the economic balance in the land? “In the year of **jubilee** the field shall return to the one from whom it was bought, whose holding the land is” (Lev. 27:24). When the trumpet sounds, everybody returns

property, everybody cancels debts, everybody breaks off the mad scramble for accumulating, stealing, deceiving, defrauding, and acquiring. Jubilee announces that God wants the little ones to have their stuff. One day there will be a Jubilee and when it comes, the little ones, the poor ones, the left out ones, the ones begging for crumbs, are coming for their stuff. I don't know when this will happen, but Jubilee will be.

The politics of Jesus are the most difficult, the most demanding, most outrageous requirements of biblical faith. Jesus himself is the Jubilee. He intends to give social power and social access and social goods to the poor. And the Gospel says, "They were filled with rage." Even if you don't want to hear about good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and Jubilee for the little ones, you can't stop it. You can resist it. You can try to defeat it, but you will not be able to overthrow God's platform. The politics of Jesus will one day reign forever and forever and forever. Amen.