

Advice to prudent preachers

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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Max Stackhouse, in his essay on “Public Theology and Ethical Judgment,” asks, “What allows human life to flourish so that the common life can flourish?” If it is a question that is ever asked in the congregational setting, it will drive teaching and preaching toward other questions, and some answers, in the political realm of the life of the community.

Therefore, the prudent preacher who treasures his or her place will do whatever he or she can to prevent the question from ever coming up. Why? Because there is nothing prudent about wading into issues of civil politics with questions like this one that demand an honest examination of one’s own political views at the very place where following Jesus will lead right into the temple and confrontation with conditions of community life and political power.

That doesn’t mean preachers can’t be political in the pulpit and be prudent at the same time. In fact there are two paths to take. The first requires an ability to read the political drift of the majority of those sitting in the pews, and offer appropriate biblical platitudes that appear to endorse it while assuring everyone that Jesus approves. OK, really there is only one path. The other is to be deliberate in promoting one’s own political views, adorned with appropriate God talk, with the intention of building a congregation around them. The prudent preacher will, of course, choose the first path. The second can lead to great success, maybe even a hit television show, but it’s very risky, and prudent preachers avoid risk.

Honestly asking what allows human life to flourish in one’s congregation, community, state, and nation is also risky because good answers can only rise through conversation that may generate conflict and expose irreconcilable differences. Moreover, there is a prickly ‘so that’: so that the common life can flourish. There may be any number of ways in which the individual human life can flourish if it is disinterested in how it inhibits a flourishing community life. Contributing to a flourishing community life may limit some ways of maximizing a flourishing individual life. You can see how complicated this can get. Who can count

the number of career gallows or opportunities for congregational disintegration? The prudent preacher is well-advised to steer clear.

What if one does not want to be a prudent preacher, but does want to be serious about asking the question in the context of preaching and teaching? The gospel is a good place to start. What a novel idea that is. A particularly good place to begin is with Jesus' new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. It compels the famous prior question: how has Jesus loved us? That's what the six months of Ordinary Time are about. They are six months of wading into the Gospel narratives to examine what Jesus said and did that demonstrate love for us, so that we might incorporate at least some of it into our own lives, individually and corporately. Maybe the reason that we dedicate six months every year is that we are not very good at it. It's a slow process, at least for me.

And, it's a slow process that always leads in one direction. Whatever Jesus said or did always affected the conditions of life that enable it to flourish, individually and in community. Paul, whatever his many limitations, well understood that as he bent to the task of bringing healing and reconciliation into the lives of individual persons, and into the communal lives the congregations under his care, so that they could flourish. Peter did the same as he worked to build bridges between observant Jews who followed Jesus and non-observant, uncircumcised gentiles who also followed Jesus. But it cannot stop with persons and congregations. If the gospel is to spread throughout the world for the salvation of the world, then how societies are governed must also be engaged.

Some engage boldly and are ignored until decades have passed, Augustine for instance. Others engage boldly and pay the ultimate price, Martin Luther King Jr. for instance. I'm not that bold, but I'm not all that prudent either. The question is ever present in my preaching and teaching, and I always ask those who are listening to meditate and pray about what the answers might mean for them in the way they lead their daily lives, with the intention that the question will be revisited in a new way each Sunday for six months every year. Has it changed anything? I think so, at least for me and the few who have been listening. Of course, I've gone from a large congregation in a major city to a medium congregation in a small city to a tiny congregation in a rural town. Prudent preachers may not want to follow my lead.

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