

Politics, the pulpit, and my pastoral calling

It's not easy to avoid the perception of a political motive.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 24, 2021](#) issue



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Preaching in a time of deep political polarization is fraught with challenge. Add a pandemic that forces worship to go virtual and the challenge magnifies. Give-and-take exchanges that are a normal part of in-person gatherings are now replaced by an experience that feels unilateral. Pulpit statements can sound one-sided and void of parishioner input. For congregations where most everybody shares a common political ideology, this might not be a problem. But preachers in more diverse settings face a range of politically charged criticisms.

These days, many worshipers seem ready to assign a political motive to a preacher's every utterance and silence. Say too much or too little (or nothing at all) about Black lives mattering, about arson and looting after the police killing of George Floyd, about the Capitol riot, or about Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem and you're apt to be viewed as hyperpartisan or politically out of touch. I realize that the manner in

which one speaks on such subjects matters hugely. But in some congregations, even if you preach a deeply biblical sermon on Philippians 2:3—“in humility regard others as better than yourselves”—you should be ready for the charge that you just took an underhanded slap at Donald Trump’s narcissism. I’ve been there.

I’m hardly without conscience or conviction on matters that strike at the heart of the gospel or tear at the moral fabric of society. I’m certainly not afraid to speak candidly to biblical justice and faith-filled hope. But what I’m not willing to do is trade in the gravity of my calling as a pastor for the sake of satisfying particular partisan loyalties. I’m not interested in becoming a political animal.

When preaching a sermon or addressing a congregation in tense times, I have several principles that guide me.

If the goal of a good sermon is to help individuals meet God or be met by God, which seems right to me, I want to try to say things that have biblical resonance, create spiritual footing, and help reveal Christ’s presence in the world. If I am to contribute words that are supposed to bring understanding to a cultural or political event, I want those words to offer new insight and fresh perspective. If they merely state what everybody already knows from the news cycle, listeners will only be waiting to see if my words confirm their partisan leanings.

Perhaps most urgent of all, I want to avoid contributing to a crisis prevalent in our time, namely, the subordination of faith to politicized identities and partisan politics. It wasn’t always this way or this extreme. But increasingly, people in the pew derive their moral meaning from their politics. Instead of allowing their theological convictions and values to shape their political perspectives, many Christians now interpret faith through the prism of their political ideology. The preacher’s task is to help people focus on their religious identity ahead of their partisan identity, and not all language helps with this task.

In the end, I want my preaching and pastoral leadership to help people increase the abundance of their life in Christ. Creating a more just and humane world begins with the construction of spiritual, moral, and aesthetic lives, not principally political ones.

That’s my view, at least. I’ve disappointed plenty of people over the years by what I’ve said or not said from the pulpit. But helping fashion spiritually deep lives (including my own) remains my goal and calling.

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