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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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Mark 10: 35-45

### **“Countercultural Advice”**

Two weeks ago, 1500 preachers across the United States participated in Pulpit Freedom Sunday. On that Sunday, 1500 preachers deliberately broke the law by endorsing a political candidate. As you all probably know, under the U.S. tax code, preachers may express views on any issue, but we jeopardize our church’s tax-exempt status when we speak for or against any political candidate.

A NC pastor who participated in Pulpit Freedom Sunday argued in his sermon that issues such as the sanctity of life, marriage, religious freedom and the national debt mattered "to the judgment hand of God."

"The American politician must hear you," he told his congregation. "You, sir and ma'am, are responsible for the governing of this nation today. As a follower of Jesus Christ, I will not vote for a candidate that violates the principles of God on the issues I've discussed," he said, before going on to endorse a candidate for the NC state Supreme Court. His sermon received a standing ovation.

(<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/08/us-usa-tax-pulpit-idUSBRE89700E20121008>)

At the same time Pulpit Freedom Sunday was happening, the pew forum published its recent study on a group now known as “the nones”. “The nones” is the fastest growing "religious" group in America, and it is made up of people with no religion at all.

The number of “nones” has grown by 25% in the past five years alone, and the “nones” are growing even faster among younger Americans. One reason cited for the rise of the “nones” is the perception among them that religious institutions are too deeply entangled with politics and they don’t like it.

But when asked what the political ramifications might be for the growing group of “nones”, one of its spokespersons said it should translate into great political representation for secular interests. “We won’t be dismissed or ignored anymore,” he said. (<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/10/09/survey-one-in-five-americans-is-religiously-unaffiliated/>)

It’s not quite as strong a statement as the NC pastor, but both groups are clearly vying for and want political power.

In today’s story from Mark, Jesus had something to say about political power. Specifically, he compared how he uses “power” to how the rulers and politicians of his day used their power. And what he had to say about how he uses power, and how his

disciples should use their power, was completely counter-cultural, and remains so today. I don't think Jesus would approve of any group, religious or not, vying to sit at his right or left hand for their own personal gain.

“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you,” James and John ask Jesus. Now any parent knows that when a child makes a statement like that, it can't be good. They're scheming for something. In Mark's story, James and John the sons of Zebedee are vying for power. They want the best seats in the house.

Now, before we hang the narcissistic duo out to dry, I think it's only fair to admit that all of us have some Zebedee in our genes. We don't want to sit in the cheap seats, either. We much prefer positions of prestige and privilege.

But what's so ironic about the brothers' request is that Jesus has just finished telling the disciples, for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time, that he's going to be tried, convicted and killed, and that the only people who will be at his left and right hand at that time will be two thieves.

Jesus' death on the cross, which is looming increasingly large in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, is not the place of prestige and privilege James and John envisioned when they got out of their boat and dropped their fishing nets to follow Jesus. The Messiah they envisioned, the Messiah they learned about as students in the synagogue, would rule much like the Roman rulers-with power and might and prestige. That messiah would sit on a throne which looked very much like the throne the Roman emperor sat upon.

So before we get too critical of James and John, I think it's important for us to remember that what they're asking for, is what they had been taught to expect. And in all fairness, it's what we expect of people in power.

But as we know, Jesus preached and embodied a different type of power, a counter-cultural power, in which those who want to be first and great must be servants and live their lives for others. Jesus believed that power is best used when serving others, not lording it over others to gain popularity or votes or status or to secure one's own position. Indeed, the very kingdom Jesus was trying to usher in and build, which he referred to as the realm of God, was marked by fairness, equality, economic justice, peace, freedom, and abundance for all. Indeed, in the Realm of God, one's position of power, and one's political affiliations no longer serve their own interests but serve the good of the whole human family, all of God's children.

Which means that when we are considering candidates for office and whether they should get our vote, the question we need to ask ourselves, shouldn't be “which candidate will serve my self interest's best?”, but “which one will best serve everyone's interests?”

Those are two very different questions, because one puts me and my needs first, and the other looks at what is best for everyone. Naturally, our tendency is to ask the first question first, because Zebedee is in our DNA. But Jesus wants us to ask the second one first, which is which candidate will best serve everyone's interests?

As reformed Christians, we are being both faithful to God and faithful to our nation when we seek common ground and the common good. The confessional base for this is found in our Brief Statement of Faith. The third section describes the work of the Holy Spirit and states that the Spirit “gives us courage to work with others for justice, freedom and peace” (C-10.4). The use of the word “others” is quite intentional and was discussed at length by the drafting committees. It does not say “other Christians” or others who may be like-minded, but simply “others”. This suggests that Reformed Christians should be actively seeking out people who can come together around the issues that make real the Realm of God. In other words, we should be bridge builders and architects of common ground.

Such a stance is in stark contrast to those who are dedicated to single-issue politics, whether the issue be gun control or the right to bear arms, abortion rights or criminalization of abortion. Issues need strong advocates, and lobbyists often need to specialize. But complete dedication to one issue makes it difficult to see larger pictures and often results in one person or group gaining power at the expense of another.

But also know that the search for common ground is not simply the search for compromise as a means to end conflict. For the Christian, common ground will have certain content to it. We are called to seek the good of all because of our conviction that part of God’s vision for God’s people is life in community that builds up, sustains and enhances human life. Therefore, our search for common ground will include the search for those things that make human life more humane. It will include using power in a way that serves others and seeks the kingdom of God, not a kingdom that seeks the best seats in the house no matter the cost to others. (Rev. Dr. Cynthia M. Campbell, “Answering the Challenge of Political Life”)

I want to close with a wonderful quote that Dianne Modrell shared with me several years ago, and I have shared with you before at election times. It is worth sharing again. It says: “Inside of sacred space you can love America and critique America at the same time. Inside of sacred space you can weep for the bigger evil of which both sides are victims.”

This statement is attributed to Richard Rohr, who is a Franciscan priest. I find that ironic and hopeful. Ironic that I, a Presbyterian clergywoman, would quote a Franciscan priest in a sermon on politics, and hopeful because it shows that common ground is possible.

Father Rohr completed that statement by saying, “Inside of sacred space you can imagine an alternative universe because you have now been there yourself. Inside of sacred space you can - if you can dare imagine it - hear God.”

Inside this sacred space we’re called to imagine the Realm of God. Out there, we’re required to build it. And one of the ways we do that is to get involved, to be informed, to speak up, to pray, and to vote. I cannot tell you how to vote, but I can ask you to take your faith seriously when you step into the voting booth. As one person said, “We’ve certainly done our best messing up God’s world, the least we can do is make it right

again.” So vote. But don’t vote your checkbook, or your personal agenda, or your fear, or the place that will give you the best seats in the house. Vote your faith. And remember the words of Jesus:

*You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”*

Amen.