

The IRS Goes to Church

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr, Rector, All Saints church, Pasadena, California

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I enjoyed the hymn we just sang. Speaking of hymns I received an e-mail from someone in the UK who suggested that All Saints might like to learn the song, “When IRS eyes are smiling.”

The Internal Revenue Service has come to church. It has come to church here at All Saints. The IRS has focused on the sermon preached by Rector Emeritus, George Regas, from this pulpit the Sunday before the last Presidential election. The IRS claims that the sermon violated IRS regulations against campaign intervention despite the fact that George Regas explicitly stated that he was not advising anyone to vote for either presidential candidate. In fact he acknowledged that good people of deep faith would be voting for President Bush and good people of deep faith would be voting for Senator Kerry.

Since last June All Saints has been in conversation with the IRS about this matter. Our attorneys in a Washington, D.C. tax firm have been speaking on our behalf. The IRS offered to drop the inquiry if we would admit that we had violated the tax regulations and promised never to do so again. We refused on the grounds that All Saints has done nothing wrong. Furthermore, over the years we have consistently worked within the IRS regulations – regulations we consider to be healthy for our democracy and which we believe protect the precious principles of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The case has now been taken from the level of the field office in Des Moines, Iowa to a regional investigator. We are awaiting their finding.

Long ago, God called All Saints Church to teach and preach Jesus’ core values of inclusion, of compassion, healing, environmental justice, peacemaking, and economic justice. This church invites everyone to embody those values in the political arena of life. This includes sometimes critiquing policies which violate those core values. We must always conduct our social action from a non-partisan perspective. That is why we have criticized the policies of both President Bush and Senator Kerry. That is why we critique both the executive and the legislative branches of government for perpetuating this unjust, immoral war by their refusal to develop an exit strategy that brings an end to the killing of both Iraqi and American lives and the increase of terrorism in the Middle East and throughout the world at the price tag of more than *1 billion dollars a week*. That is why we endorse the efforts of both Democratic Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey and Republican Congressman Walter Jones who have jointly called for the development of an exit strategy from Iraq. That is why we endorse the efforts of Senator John McCain to put an end to U.S. sponsored torture.

Our non-partisanship is a holy space from which we can without obligation or allegiance to any party or person bring the core values of our faith to bear on the institutions and culture around us remembering that faith without works is dead and that we are called to be doers of the Word not hearers only.

Faith in action is called politics. Spirituality without action is fruitless and social action without spirituality is heartless. We are boldly political without being partisan. Having a partisan-free place to stand liberates the religious patriot to see clearly, speak courageously, and act daringly.

All Saints is energetically resisting the IRS's interpretation of the IRS regulations. The IRS is arguing that they can investigate a church based on a field officers' *subjective* determination that a preacher's sermon *implicitly* opposes or endorses candidates, regardless of the *explicit* statements of the preacher.

This means that any sermon which states a church's core values, when proclaimed during an election season, can be subjectively deemed to be campaign intervention. If this IRS interpretation stands, that means that a preacher cannot speak boldly about the core values of his or her faith community without fear of governmental recrimination. And in our case, that means that a preacher cannot without fear of governmental recrimination speak boldly about the value of promoting peace if the nation happens to be at war during an election season. But the Bible tells us to preach the Word in season and out of season and the last time I checked the original Greek text there was no exception for the election season. (2 Thessalonians 4: 2)

There is no season when a believer should refrain from calling the government to develop an exit strategy from an immoral war which has now taken the lives of over 2,000 U.S. soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis, and which rewards corporations no-bid contracts without any accountability, takes away civil liberties, sets up ghost torture centers, sets Christian against Muslim, and, paired with tax cuts for the super wealthy, steals food from the poor and steals schools and health-care from children.

No wonder we at All Saints have this week received a surprising outpouring of solidarity and support from a host of other believers across the dividing lines of the culture wars, support from Jews and Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, from First Amendment lawyers and scholars, and from heads of secular non-profit and non-governmental organizations. An evangelical Christian radio show host told me during an interview Friday, "Pastor if they are coming for you today, they will be coming for us tomorrow."

We are all remembering those dark days in history when religious people thought it was not spiritual to get involved in social action and politics and so remained quiet. A Christian Pastor, Martin Niemoeller, after he was released from Dachau, ended all of his sermons the following way, "First they came for the communists and I was not a communist and I didn't speak up, then they came for the labor organizers and I was not a labor organizer and I didn't speak up, and then they came for the Jews and I was not a Jew so I didn't speak up, and then they came for me but there was no one left to speak up."

In many ways I am grateful that the IRS has come to Church at All Saints because both people of faith and people who do not profess a belief are coming together to hold up something essential in a democracy – the separation of Church and State. There is something bigger at stake here than All Saints.

What is at stake is that precious, holy freedom from intimidation when religious leaders enter that sacred place called a pulpit. The only voice a preacher needs to be heeding when she or he is in the pulpit is the voice of God's Spirit speaking to the human conscience and heart. In order for that mystical transaction to take place freely there must be no fear of incrimination that a value-filled sermon will be subjectively deemed to be a partisan-filled endorsement. I am grateful that the IRS has come to Church at All Saints so that we can express before the world without fear the principles of freedom of religion and freedom of speech. The IRS agents are welcome in our pews. They are *not* welcome in our pulpit.

Jesus told a great parable so applicable to this situation (Matthew 25: 14-29). It is a parable about the paralyzing effects of fear. It is a parable calling for love-based risk-taking rather than fear-based playing-it-safe. In Jesus' story three people are given great sums of money to manage while a rich man is away on a journey. Two stewards took that with which they were entrusted and invested it so that they doubled the value of the sums they were given. The third dug a hole and buried the money in the ground which of course resulted in nothing gained. When the landowner returned he praised the first two and called the third worthless and lazy. The third played it safe with his gifts because he was afraid.

We have been given many gifts. We must not bury them, be quiet about them, or play it safe with them.

We have been given the gift of knowing God to be a loving God rather than a wrathful, punitive God. There is no need for fear in life because we know God to be a loving, forgiving, nurturing, and inclusive God rather than a condemning God.

There are two competing attitudes for the face of Christianity today. There is the attitude of inclusiveness, compassion, forgiveness, justice and peace rooted in the house of love rather than the house of fear. People who know this God are largely free, imaginative, courageous, risk-taking, and visionary. There is the competing attitude of punishment, condemnation, terrorism, and wrath. People who fabricate a God like this are often adaptive and resentful who out of anxiety want a risk-free theology, a risk-free Church, and a risk-free society that will always guarantee their safety and security.

Jesus was familiar with these competing attitudes about God. In the first century, in the face of a punitive condemning Roman Empire and its occupation of Jesus' homeland and in the face of religious leaders who had become the empire's catechists, evangelists, and acolytes, always interested in drawing lines of division between rich and poor, sinner and righteous, gentile and Jew, male and female, slave and free, Jesus drew a circle of unconditional love that encircled them all.

Jesus called people into community as we do here at All Saints and was constantly feeding them from the table of community, always bringing children into the center of the circle. That is why going to church is so important for us – to gather in the community that is based in love, not fear. Jesus was never afraid, never afraid to break down the dividing walls that oppressed the victims of imperialism in his day. No wonder people flocked to him, for in that force field there was joy, there was healing of old wounds, there was unconditional acceptance. There was a sense of whoever someone was and wherever they were on their journey, they were welcome. And Jesus was never afraid, never afraid to stand up to the religious and political elites.

We cannot bury this gift in the ground because of fear. We must risk this precious gift God has given us in our faith community. People of faith all over this country must risk this precious gift of God's love so that all Americans can be free to express their conscience whether it agrees with our government or not. It is only in freedom that we can find the truth. And the truth is always a power that sets us free.

A second gift we have been given is what Jesus called neighbor-love. He said, "Love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself." And then he told another story illustrating that God's definition of neighbor is not someone who lives in your zip code. Your neighbor is anyone who has been beaten and is lying in the ditch of life.

Your neighbor is anyone who needs you to be neighbor to them. Your neighbor is a child in America underserved by our society. Your neighbor is a prisoner in Guantanamo Bay without due process. Your neighbor is someone in what is now known as "black sites" in Eastern Europe, where ghost detainees are subject to unknown interrogation methods. Your neighbor is a civilian in Falluja who is suffering from illegally dropped white phosphorous incendiary bombs. Your neighbor is someone in Darfur who is living in a refugee camp fearful of no food, fearful of being raped tonight, or fearful of helicopters swirling above.

Jesus went so far as to say that when you are neighbor to the least of these in the human family, you have done that act of mercy or justice or peace-making to Jesus himself – you have done it to God.

What a gift! We cannot bury that gift in the ground of fear just because the IRS has come to church.

The last gift I am going to mention is the gift the prophets gave us almost 3,000 years ago. It is the gift of speaking truth to power. The prophet Nathan said to the powerful King David, "You are the man." Jeremiah and Isaiah and Amos and Hosea said to their rulers and the false prophets who were the chaplains for those rulers, "You must stop the injustice and violence and oppression in our land." In our time in the 21st century you and I have been entrusted with this same gift of speaking truth to power.

What a gift! We cannot bury that gift in the ground just because the IRS has come to church. We must raise our voices without fear and with fierce tenacity until this war stops, until this torturing stops, until this genocide in Darfur stops.

We are happy that the IRS goes to church. We are happy to have the IRS go to church at All Saints Church. When the IRS comes to this church we want them to know that our mission is not so much to work to get to heaven, but to work to get heaven to earth. What we will resist with all our might are all infringements on freedom of speech and freedom of religion and any suggestion that we temper the proclamation of God as the God of love rather than the God of fear. We will resist with all our might any efforts trying to prevent us from proclaiming the love of neighbor in season and out of season. And we will protest and resist any efforts of the government coming into the pulpits of our land with a call to reverse a 3,000-year-old prophetic vocation to speak truth to power.

In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, today is a time for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.

Amen.