

**The Rev. John Morris**  
**Sermon for 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost,**  
**All Saints', Littleton, NH: August 7, 2022**

A parishioner once came to me after a Sunday Eucharist and said, "Your sermons are too political." I asked him to be more specific and we chatted briefly, then he said, "There's a book you should read. It is entitled To Comfort or to Challenge. You need to decide if you are here to comfort us or challenge us. I come here for comfort." I thanked him for his honesty and said I hoped we could have further conversation about the issue. In the meantime, I would try to locate that book. When I got home...lo and behold...I had a copy of the book on my shelf. The book is by sociologists who studied the Episcopal Church in the 1960s, a turbulent time of civil rights struggles, anti-war activity, women's liberation, gay liberation, etc. The sociologists traveled all over the country and interviewed clergy and laity about how their congregations were responding to what was happening. Was the Church speaking out on the many issues or was it just confining itself to so-called "spiritual" matters? It is a helpful book. The problem in terms of my conversation with the parishioner who recommended the book is that the title of the book is: To Comfort AND To Challenge. The publisher summarizes the book in this way: *"The authors focus on two themes which have run concurrently throughout the history of Christianity: to ease the pain of human misery and to provide moral and social leadership. The Church's commitments to comfort and to challenge represent two distinct orientations to the problems of suffering and injustice in secular society. The first aims at helping sufferers cope with their daily miseries, while the second calls for social change, even to the point of racially restructuring those very institutions which cause suffering."*

Doing both these tasks is like walking a tightrope, of course, and I am sure I have fallen off the rope in one direction or the other many times in my 50+ years of preaching. But I still hold onto the task summarized in the famous quip: "The Church is called to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." All too often, the Church has comforted the comfortable (which seemed to be what that parishioner was wanting).

In preparing to preach this sermon, I was in conversation with a colleague who also would be preaching on this Sunday. She sent me this note: "I remember a New Yorker cartoon depicting a very well-dressed, rather snooty-looking couple walking down the stone steps of an imposing (had to be Episcopal!) church, with a minister greeting other congregants behind them. The woman said to the man with her, "On the whole, he does a good job with the sermon. It's so hard to avoid offending people like us."

The prophet Isaiah didn't mind offending people (Isaiah 1:1,10-20). Isaiah says that God wants people to take away their sacrifices and beautiful worship services. God is tired of the people's prayers and wonderful music. God wants people to seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow. If Isaiah was prophesying in 2022, he might add: "work for economic justice, defend democracy, welcome the immigrant, and protect members of the LGBTQ community." And in many congregations, if Isaiah had preached that message, he would either get run out of the parish or parishioners would leave the congregation, which is what happened to the parishioner described above.

It's easy to say, "Don't mix politics and religion." But I think it is impossible NOT to mix them.

Politics and religion are fundamentally about what we value, as individuals and as a society, so the two are inextricably mixed. Consider the Exodus story. Moses said to Pharaoh “Let my people go! God abhors slavery!” Pharaoh said, “I want to keep my slaves. You are mixing your religion with my politics!” So, in that story, who said, “Don’t mix religion and politics?” Shouldn’t we avoid being like Pharaoh?

This is, of course, a huge topic, which can’t be dealt with in one sermon. But let’s allow the author of the letter to the Hebrews help us (Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16). <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>That author reflects in our “dual citizenship.” On the one hand, we live an earthly, embodied life with all its challenges and blessings, but we also are citizens of a “heavenly home.” There is some tension between these two identities. We have been given the “peace that passes all understanding,” that is God’s eternal comfort. But we are also called to live with God’s values as we travel as pilgrims on earth. We are dual citizens.

One cause of conflict between our two identities is possessions. Jesus says (Luke 12:32-40): “Don’t get possessed by your possessions. Travel lightly. Don’t accumulate a lot of stuff, because it will ultimately conflict with God’s values.” In other words, the Kingdom of Stuff will always collide with the Kingdom of God.

Jesus say, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” For example, if you are deeply invested in the stock market, isn’t it tempting to check that day’s stock market report instead of starting the day with a devotional time of giving thanks to God and meditating on all of God’s blessings?

I am not trying to simplify these issues. There are lots of conflicts involved in trying to be faithful to God while enjoying our earthly possessions. There are no easy answers for most of us in this situation.

When I lived in southern Vermont, I had a friend whose son was graduating from Brattleboro High School. He finished all his requirements by the end of his first semester as a senior, so he decided to hike the Appalachian Trail while his classmates finished their last semester. In the later spring, he took a break from his hike to come back to Vermont for his commencement ceremony. He was one of the student speakers at the ceremony. His memorable speech was basically about “what I have learned on the Appalachian Trail.” He said that he learned that he had started out with too much stuff. He had to get rid of excess baggage. He had to decide what the absolute essentials are. He had to travel lightly.

Sounds a bit like Jesus, doesn’t it?

There is our ongoing challenge: to decide what is important, as individuals and as a society, and then to do what we can to make sure God’s values are predominant. The Good News is that, even as we face the challenges of our dual citizenship, there is no better comfort on our earthly journey than the presence of God, whose peace passes all understanding. May it be so for you.