

Sermon: Politics is the Continuation of Poetry By Other Means

Pastor Daniel Ruen • September 30th, 2017 • Yom Kippur • Beth Emet Synagogue

First of all, allow me to express my love and appreciation for this congregation, and for Rabbi Andrea. It is an immense honor to be welcomed into your sanctuary on such a holy day as this.

Rabbi Andrea, Pastor Michael, and I have been growing in mutual bonds of respect, action, and enjoyment for some time. For the three of us to be here on this day, in this manner, is a great blessing from God. It is a sign of the Beloved Community in our midst.

This last weekend at our 11am Sunday service I read a quote from Father Stanley Rother's journal, written while when he was in Guatemala in 1980.

It was written one year before he was murdered by a paramilitary assassin.

"The country here is in rebellion," he wrote. "And the government is taking it out on the church.

The low wages that are paid, the very few who are excessively rich, the bad distribution of land—these are just some of the reasons for widespread discontent. The church seems to be the only force trying to do something about the situation. Therefore, the government is after us."

Father Rother's quote cements for me an answer to this question of 'Politics and the Pulpit,' the challenge Rabbi Andrea put to Pastor Michael and me as an invitation to speak to you today.

My answer, keeping Father Rother's quote in mind, is this:

It doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter what *we* think is appropriately political or not coming from our rabbis, pastors, and imams.

It doesn't matter what Rabbi Andrea, Pastor Michael, or I think is appropriately political coming from *you*, our congregants, or our faithful neighbors.

The synagogue, the parish, the mosque: we have always been viewed as political targets by the totalitarian impulse, present in *every* country, in every *century*.

And if we are who we say we are, we will continue to be so, for all time.

Any institution that gathers voluntarily to discuss relevant ethical questions, to educate its adults and children about those same ethical questions,

and to take action to somehow meet the ethical injustices of poverty, war, sexism and homophobia is *automatically a political entity* in the eyes of the powers and principalities.

I have heard it said in a similar way with regard to how you must carefully consider yourselves at different times and different places.

Whether a Jew considered themselves 'Jewish' was irrelevant in the face of the Shoah, was it not? For if someone with a gun and enough hatred says, "You're Jewish," or says, "You're 'political,'" then you are.

So if I'm right, and we're rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic with this internal anxiety of what is appropriate politics from our pulpits, then I prefer to move toward the question of *how* we are political, not *whether* we should be.

Von Clausewitz famously stated that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means.'

I submit that, when the synagogue, the church, or the mosque is preaching and practicing its faith with integrity, then religious politics are the continuation of *poetry* by other means.

Our politics are the continuation of poetry by other means.

For the words of Isaiah 58 are, first and foremost, Hebrew poetry. They are to be encountered *as poetry* before anything else. It is not a story. It is not a teaching. It is not a doctrine. It is poetry.

Meant to rally Isaiah's broken, weary people toward a great vision of justice, beauty, and reconciliation.

And so you see, it is not *whether* Isaiah is preaching politics—for who could doubt Isaiah's poetic anger and rhythmic insistence concerning justice in this passage?—

it is *how* Isaiah is preaching politics. Isaiah and, by extension, the synagogue, the church, the mosque, operate *politically* as centers of prophetic *poetry*.

When white supremacy, war, and income inequality are on the rise, we are to preach, teach, and act in favor of God's poetic vision.

We are not called to endorse candidates or to turn our synagogues, churches and mosques into call centers for various political campaigns. No.

What we are called to do is to *invoke the poetry* of God's justice, and the poetry of God's mercy, and the poetry of God's commands to love the neighbor, with creativity, courage, and joy. Yes, **joy**.

For one of the reasons we will *always be a target* for the powers and principalities is that we have, *all of us*, an ultimate message of joy. And *the world still does not know how to defeat it*.

The world generally works by dividing and distracting and demeaning—it has no answer for the joy of the Jewish Jubilee year,

or the eschatological feast promised by Jesus,

or the humble power of repentance and atonement for the sake of repairing your relationships, and returning to your best self.

If you were to ask me how exactly we are to do this, I might say something like, 'You're doing it.' You're supporting it right now.

Rabbi Andrea, Pastor Michael, and I, working and marching and creating together, are the politics of God's love by poetic means. We are inherently political, just by our cooperation.

And we, the three of us, represent the beloved community in our bodies, our histories, our yearnings, our mutual struggle.

So you see, our politics are most effective when we courageously, joyfully, *live out the call of our traditions together*, working to make real God's vision of peace, justice, and love.

Our politics is our poetry. Our poetic politics is in helping to raise up a grass-roots movement that rejects the economic, white supremacist, war-centered, greed-infused narrative currently en vogue in the highest level of political office.

But we must keep the focus on God's poetry.

For God's poetry, God's vision, God's call is more persuasive than reacting negatively to hatred,

God's poetry is more persuasive than angry rallies and social media screeds,

God's poetry is more persuasive than violence, even if it is *justified* violence.

There is a saying from the peace process in El Salvador:

"We will be able to move forward when the potential for the future becomes more powerful than the pain of the past."

"We will be able to move forward when the potential for the future **becomes more powerful** than the pain of the past."

Only poetry can move the heart with power.

Only poetry can move others toward a shared, societal potential, a moment of mercy that turns into a *movement for justice*.

Our powerful poetry is the potential for the future, and the world is *desperate* for it.

Our poetry is the vision of free higher education for all.

Our poetry dreams of robust support for families.

Our poetry is about a healthy work/life balance.

Our poetry is an active response to climate change.

Our poetry is about an abundance of high-paying jobs for the young and old alike.

Our poetry is about a great table, filled with food, where every nationality, every ethnicity, every gender identity, is welcome at the celebration.

The more specific we make our poetic politics, the more we make it *real* for everyone, on all sides of every issue, the more effective we will be as faith-rooted, inspired people.

Because everyone, *everyone*, left and right, young and old, Jew and gentile, black and latinx, cisgender and transgender—*everyone* wants and deserves a seat at the feast.

All we need to do, is joyfully, patiently, courageously set the table with the poetry God has already given us.

Our politics is our poetry, and I am convinced:

the world has no way to defeat it. Amen.