

Our ministry of advocacy

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When he [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' Luke 4

Jim Wallis, who has invigorated the voice of justice in the evangelical church, says of this text in the Gospel of Luke, that it is the announcement of Jesus' mission – his mission statement. I would say that it is clue for us, who are people of the Book, people who live in the tradition of the prophets, to see what is God's vision for this creation.

When I was asked to speak at this Advocacy Day, it was a very different time in the state of Wisconsin (or should I say THIS is a very different time in the state of Wisconsin?) and for that matter in this country and in the world.

I said yes to the invitation, feeling privileged to have been asked to give some voice to a gathering of voices from a faith community that is broad and deep, varied and common, to gather here to share one voice in advocacy for those who need to hear that voice and those who need the way to sound that voice.

In this very new political climate we have a particular challenge as people of faith in "Advocacy Days." Certainly, surely, not to ignore the obvious but neither to be so enveloped in this one moment, only, exclusively, indistinguishably in this current crisis moment, that we fail to be faithful to what I will call a ministry of advocacy – yes a ministry - that must have breath beyond one moment and one political climate.

As people of faith a year ago and five years from now, we have reason to do advocacy because we bring a particular and peculiar vocabulary to the fore.

What are the words that are in your advocacy vocabulary?

I have a suspicion, more than a little hunch, that many, if not most of us who have chosen to gather together here, this day, have come not to be convinced that it is right or good or appropriate for the faith community to be engaged in the ministry – yes call it what it is, a ministry – of advocacy.

No, on the contrary I imagine that here we are, an assembly of folks who, while we surely will differ – and perhaps strenuously - on many matters of faith tradition, piety, theology,

polity, ecclesiology (if we are in the Christian tradition) understanding of God and divinity - we would find this common, dare I call it holy common ground on which to stand: It is not only appropriate or permissible; it is incumbent upon us as people of faith to engage in advocacy.

Karen Armstrong informs us that all faith traditions – Christian, Muslim, Judaism, and not only these three – share a foundational principle that we in the human realm we care for others in the way we would desire to be cared for; variations on the theme of the “golden rule.”

But we cannot take it for granted that all of the faith community, our sisters and brothers, in all of our varied traditions share the same sense of what it means to *follow* the teaching of our faith.

How many of us were in one way or another taught that faith and politics do not meet; don't talk about church and don't talk politics. That was drilled into my little Norwegian Lutheran head years ago. Well, it's bad advice.

I have a bias and that is that the critics who look at faith communities from outside, those who look in at us from outside of our walls and judge that we are irrelevant, of little value or viability -- if we are silent in the market place, muzzled in the halls of legislature and the executive offices, voiceless in the issues that rock our lives and matter in our politics, then their critique about us is right on!

And so let me suggest that not only is it our task to have a voice among senators and Congressmen and women, members of the Assembly, governors and in executive offices of government. It is right and good and appropriate. It is incumbent upon us to be advocates in our mosques and synagogues and churches within our own communities of faith to engage our sacred texts.

But not that only.

Because we are who we are, we must use our voice with God! I have to take us there before I take us to the Capitol. We are, are we not, people of faith? So we talk not only to ourselves and to one another but also to God. It is right for us to listen to God and to expect God to listen to us.

So we form our words in advocacy, check them out with God, try them there, test them there, hone them, sharpen them, soften them, embolden them, fire and forge them with God.

If you believe that God is real and up to anything that matters at all in this world and in the lives of real people and real circumstances in this world – farm workers, immigrants, single mothers, uninsured children, public servants, school teachers, nurses, employers and employees, hungry folks, street residing folks, bullies and bullied, soldiers and lawmakers -- let God hear from you . . . about them! And listen to God speak to you

about them! It would not be the first time a person of faith pleaded with God on behalf of others, making a case for them

Nearly 1.5 billion people in this world are in severe poverty. And one out of every six people in the United States struggles with hunger – that is 50 million Americans, people, who are hungry!

According to the United Nations every day 25,000 people in this world God so loves die of hunger and its affects on the human body and *Bread for the World* points out that 16,000 of those are children. Do the math; Every 3.5 seconds a person dies because of hunger; it is a child that dies every 5 seconds.

Just these last days we have heard this stunning report: the 400 wealthiest Americans have more money than half of all the Americans combined . . . 400 richest people here in this country possess more wealth than 155 million of our poorest people combined. Poverty in this country is America's shame in this moment of history.

Somewhere between three quarters of a million, 750,000, and a million women, men and children are homeless on any given night in this country.

Listen to the prophets.

Listen to God.

Listen to Jesus and advocate for the end to such shame!

Advocate for us to come to our senses.

The militarism that we are addicted to in this society and in our whole global reach, that exists to maintain our unsustainably high standard of living and our outlandish consumerism, can not continue . . . it is not working . . . it is pointless and it is unethical and immoral! It continues at the expense of the most vulnerable and the poorest among us who are robbed of food and shelter and medical care and time of leisure so that some may have very much and many will have very little.

We spend more in this country on the military than all the other nations of the world combined.

Advocate for us to come to our senses!

It is a scandal that 50 million – at least 50 million (and will that number increase?) in this land, have no medical insurance; no financial coverage for medical care.

And it is a human tragedy that on the continent of Africa every 45 seconds a child dies from malaria – a preventable disease -- one million preventable deaths a year – most of them children!

In my tradition – the Lutheran Church – we have had a long standing commitment to resettlement of refugees. It had its North American beginning in the 1950s when after World War II the church advocated for and made home for refugees of war. One of every six North American Lutherans in those years was a refugee without a home.

The displacement continues. And so does the dehumanizing of those with different languages and traditions and size and color and religion. Since the early 1930s our seasonal crops have been increasingly harvested by migrant workers and immigrants; they have worked in meatpacking and food processing plants. Now over 40% of those who are hired on our dairy farms here are immigrant workers. And farm families are shrinking; these men and women who have grown our food are more and more needing to work off their farms to supplement their incomes or to find insurance.

Now, in these years, since the '60's more and more immigrants to the U.S. have been Muslim people from the Middle East and South Asia, from war torn parts of the world. And our debates about immigrants and refugees -- they grown to a fevered pitch out of fear and ignorance and bigotry.

Advocate for respectful and dignified treatment of ALL God's children!

The King Hearings in Washington last week are a disgraceful testimony to the sin of racism, intolerance and narrow-minded ignorance.

Listen to these sacred texts:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

And

People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another

The first is from the book of Hebrews, A Christian text that echoes the strains of hospitality from the Book of Genesis in our Judeo/Christian tradition and the second is from the Qu'ran.

Listen to our sacred texts and advocate from them!

In 2008 there were 850 known hate groups in the United States; in 2011 there are 1,050 groups and more growing. The majority of them identify themselves religiously and yes many, many self identify as Christian.

So advocate already. It's not like you don't have a cause or two to glom onto. Here, now, it's really not like you don't have a cause.

A cause?

Hmmm ...

That's not good enough.

Well it might be good enough in some circumstances... but our circumstance, our peculiarity is that we are people of faith. This is not about our own agenda, nor our own cause or even our own personal convictions (about a governor or a legislator or an administration we like or do not like) – though we surely have our own personal opinions and convictions.

Our peculiarity is that we are people who have faith that God has a word to speak to us and through us in defending the poor, caring for the earth, insisting on justice, for sharing the resources of this globe for all to have, in giving voice to the marginalized, standing with the oppressed, challenging the powers that make people poor, protecting this globe that is being made ever more vulnerable, and caring for this creation when forces of greed could care less-and ravage it, distributing the bounty for all to be blessed together, insisting that the ignored are no longer cast aside.

We have something other than a cause, something more than a cause; we have a calling and a privilege as God's own to use our voices with a vocabulary of justice, a vocabulary of humility, a vocabulary of servanthood, a vocabulary of love – even for and precisely for the enemy, a vocabulary of courage, a vocabulary taught by God.

Now if you don't know it (as if you don't) you are going to be told to stay out of this -- whatever "this" is – because it is politics.

But let me ask those who tell you that: How does that square with Jeremiah or Isaiah or Amos or Micah or Hosea or Jesus? "Go and speak" -- that was the word of God to them. We have this challenge in this time to continue to be a voice that belongs not only to this moment but that carries forth the resonance of a faithful voice.

So what is your vocabulary?

Thank you for the privilege of being with you this morning and thank you for coming from your homes and churches and mosques and synagogues and workplaces – and wherever else it is that you live your lives to be part of this ministry of advocacy.