

Preaching Peace

Putting Our Political House in Order

May 10th, 2007

Sojourners editor and God's Politics author Jim Wallis is coming to Iowa next week. While he'll do a series of big public events in the fall, this trip is for meetings with religious leaders sponsored by Iowans for Sensible Priorities. Besides his confabs with local pastors, he will be joined by a couple Protestant bishops and a Catholic college president for a press conference on the need to re-vamp the federal budget. Iowans for Sensible Priorities (www.sensibleiowans.org) works with national groups like True Majority (www.truemajority.org) to encourage voters, especially young ones, to elect candidates who will make a commitment to re-prioritize national spending. They recommend taking just \$50 billion out of the current \$400 billion that goes to the Pentagon annually to fund programs like education, health care and alternative energy development in the U.S. and ending world hunger; in other words to things that directly affect the well-being of children. They compare U.S. defense spending with that of Russia, China and the "axis of evil" nations to show that we outspend all our past and current enemies by hundreds of billions each year in our quest for "security." Both organizations make wide use of the internet as well as local grassroots organizing to encourage people to learn and care about national finances and to "bird dog" campaigning politicians -- question them insistently -- to get them to take a stand on federal spending priorities.

And Jim Wallis, of course, has devoted his life to get churches to preach, teach and embody the social dimension of the Gospel, something many mainline churches stop short of doing when it comes to electoral politics. While Wallis believes in the separation of church and state, he doesn't believe that prohibits public discussion of political issues in terms of one's values and the religious faith that gives rise to those values for many people. I whole heartedly agree. I think one of the real ironies in American political discourse today is the denigration of religious speech in public life. One of the things Girard's work shows quite convincingly, I think, is that political institutions are direct, even if secularized descendants of our sacrificial religious roots. So the real question for Christians, it seems to me, is whether we are willing to risk bringing a non-sacrificial word into the public conversation, even as we render to Caesar what is Caesar's.

Iowa takes very seriously our #1 position in the presidential selection process because, no doubt, given our population most candidates wouldn't bother coming to the state if we couldn't claim special influence on the campaign process. Iowa also takes seriously its caucus process, which amounts to a series of neighborhood meetings -- albeit divided along party lines -- where Iowans get together to hash out political priorities and collective support for candidates. It really is a great way for Mary or John Q. Citizen to not only feel but become a meaningful part of the political process -- much more engaging than simply casting a ballot.

Another visitor to the state recently, again because of our position in the presidential election process, was former President Jimmy Carter. In his speech at the U of Iowa he asked Iowans to support only presidential candidates, of either party, who would pledge to work tirelessly for long-term security for Israel and justice in the formation of an independent state for Palestine. Whether or not one agrees completely with Carter's perspective on this conflict, I found his articulation about how this quagmire plagues the vision and ability of the U.S. to serve as a true world leader quite convincing.

Carter also encouraged voters to elect candidates who pledge to support public financing of presidential elections. I believe that he and Reagan were the last candidates to limit their campaigns to what public financing afforded. Carter told a wonderful story about how he and Rosalyn and his campaign staffers didn't have the money for motels during his first bid for the presidency and so stayed in private homes all across the country, often traveling by bus from town to town. Not only did this save money, but it gave them a change to get to know and better understand local political leaders, something that rarely happens today as candidates are whisked in and out of towns, often on their way to the next big fundraising event where they hobnob with those at the top of the economic ladder. When Carter took office he hosted a White House reception for those who had housed Rosalyn and him during the campaign and representatives from nearly 800 families attended, to say nothing of the hundreds more who weren't able to be there. My, how things have changed in a few short decades!

Are we ready for an "extreme makeover" of our political house?

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