

## WHEN GRACE AND SOPHIA MEET AT THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND POLITICS

NIUU – Coeur d'Alene, ID

September 29, 2024

Luke 5:33-39, I Cor. 1:20-23, James 3:13-18

An old preacher story centers on a country church called St-John's-by-the-gas-station church. After morning worship, a member came out to greet the preacher. "Preacher," he said, "you preached over my head today." To which the minister simply said, "Then raise your head."

That's what I'm asking you to do this morning, even before I speak: raise your head. Use your intellect and your imagination to explore with me the ticklish topic of how religion and politics can meet one another in healthy ways. I believe they can when they let Grace and Sophia join them at the intersection of Faith and Politics.

**Sophia** ("[wisdom](#)") is a central idea in Greek philosophy developed by Plato, religion, and later Christian theology. In Gnosticism, Sophia is identified as a feminine figure, analogous to the soul. Originally carrying a meaning of "cleverness, skill", it also took on the tone of "intelligence" and philosophia ("love of wisdom") as used by Plato.

**Grace** is, of course, a long-time word familiar to readers of both Old and New Testaments. God's grace is usually defined as undeserved favor. Grace cannot be earned; it is something that is freely given. The concept of "grace" centers on an unmerited gift of compassion we give to or receive from others. For 30 years, I've called it "God's Radical Hospitality".

In 2008, Eugene Rollins wrote a cleverly-titled book, "Grace Is *Not* A Blue-Eyed Blonde: Grace is the Joyous Unmerited Blessing of God". But for this morning, what if Grace is a blue-eyed blonde from rural America? And Sophia (wisdom) is a dark-haired Palestinian-American woman? What could they possibly have to contribute to the action found at the intersection of Faith and Politics? Pretty much everything!

So, I invite you to silently bring your own hot-button topics into the intersection of Faith and Politics – those topics you find difficult to discuss with people who disagree with you. I won't try to identify them. That's yours to do.

What I want to do is simply remind that that Grace and Sophia are with you there, if you choose to connect with them. Sophia (Wisdom) can be our guide for **what** we need to do in that intersection conversation. Grace can be our guide for **how** we do it.

You may be one of those folks who believe religion and politics have no business being in the same intersection together. There are times when that seems absolutely true! They each bring their own brand of toxicity with them. And seem eager to contaminate the other with it.

But we're in a political season where religion too often distorts how we look at the political process. And where politics effectively uses that distorted religion to impose legal but often unethical rules on citizens.

So along come Grace and Sophia to inject both undeserved love and responsible intelligence into the mix. Their tasks aren't easy, but they are critical to us strengthening our faith and our democracy!

I want to read a few verses from I Cor. (1:18-19): "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning is what I want.' (ref. - Isa. 29:14) These 2 verses simply declare God would dismantle our human foolishness by "destroying the wisdom of the wise" and replace it with the "discernment of the discerning".

One of the synonyms of the Latin word for "discern" is "sift". I like that image. Discernment can help us sift the sand from the pebbles, the wheat from the chaff, the mis- and dis-information from the correction information. What's left after the sifting process looks a good deal like what James 3 describes as "wisdom and understanding".

When was the last time you even considered entering the intersection of Faith and Politics with James's (3: 13-18) advice in mind?

“For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in people for those who make peace.”

These echo the fruits of the spirit found in Galatians 5 and other places in Paul's letters. They reflect what Sophia (wisdom) looks like when we let her sit on our shoulders as we struggle with being civil, understanding, and compassionate in the face of uncomfortable conversations in that faith/politics intersection.

So Sophia guides us to understand WHAT to do in the intersection. But she isn't there alone. Actually, Grace gets to the intersection before Sophia, according to the founder of the Methodist Church, John Wesley.

John called this “Prevenient” Grace. It's a fancy word that means “gone before.” Grace is in place before we get to where we're going, working the crowd, planting seeds of hope. I call it “Hindsight Grace”, because we tend to recognize it only when we look back.

So where is Grace in those uncomfortable conversations? Oh, she's hanging around the edges sometimes, nudging us to act on those urges to be understanding, civil, even compassionate.

She also stands by those we may not really want to talk to, urging them to also be...well, gracious. And that isn't easy for a lot of us! So here's where I ask you to “raise your head”. And maybe your heart as well!

An email friend of mine is Cynthia Astle. She is editor of United Methodist Insight, a weekly newsletter that highlights happenings in the world-wide United Methodist Church. In mid-August, Cynthia said some pointed, thoughtful things about Grace (8/16/24).

*"I sometimes think that even some Christians don't really believe in the concept of grace, that is, people getting something they didn't earn and haven't deserved. It's why the gospel is so offensive, so radical. With grace, you don't get retribution disguised as justice; you get restoration wreathed in kindness and love.*

*Practicing grace isn't easy, because it requires us to give up our right to see our adversaries as less than human and therefore dispensable by thought, word and deed. Showing grace to our supposed enemies astounds them. But it should also astound us if we're granting grace authentically without judgment or grudge-bearing.*

*That may well be what's at the root of our polarization in the United States: we've lost the ability to grant that those who hold different ideas from us can still be worthy, even righteous, people whose views could help shape God's beloved community.*"

So will we let Grace guide us in HOW to respond in the tense intersection of Faith and Politics? Perhaps one of Jesus's most famous parables might help: Wine in fresh wineskins. I wrote about this in my August Spokesman-Review faith & values column. It focused on two of the most common controversial labels we use: conservative and liberal.

We find it so difficult to even touch those labels in family conversations – especially when religion and/or politics are mentioned. "Liberal and conservative" are fighting words. But why?

One obvious reason is we fall into the "either-or" trap that says you can only be one or the other. In terms of Jesus's wine/wineskins parable, (Luke 5:36-39), that means we must keep conservative wine in one wineskin, and liberal wine in a separate one.

But what if the wines could be mixed together and put into a wineskin that was soft and supple enough to hold such a mixture? For that mix to work, Sophia and Grace can help us realize we do a great dis-service to our spirits when we arbitrarily separate "conservative" and "liberal".

“Conservative” comes from an ancient French word for “to keep, preserve, keep intact.” The fundamental question: *What are you trying to conserve, to keep intact?* Too often, the honest answer will center on ego, power, money, social position, winning an argument, whatever.

But what if you think of “conservative” in a more expansive way? What if *being a healthy conservative means to save/preserve all that is good, all that will benefit others and self?* Like someone’s self-respect? That description can inject a social compassion into being conservative that isn’t found in a rigid form of conservatism.

So, if there is a healthy sense of being “conservative” – I easily claimed this as mine – can there also be a healthy sense of being “liberal”? Of course there is! I claim that as well. “Liberal” is from an ancient Latin word that describes “gracious, generous,” but also “befitting a free person.”

*So what do healthy “liberals” seek to be free from, or to free others to do/be?* The list is almost endless. So is a list healthy “conservatives” would make to save/preserve things and people they cared about. At their centers, both labels just might want to save all that is good, to free themselves and others to be more fully human. **What if they have the same goal, but are determined to take different routes to that goal?**

Consider the possibility that you are a greater mix of conservative and liberal than you thought before you came here this morning. I think you are. I think we all are. Grace suggests we are wise (ala Sophia) to mix our wines together, blurring those labels. The conservative and liberal wines may be more alike in their essence than we usually think.

Lastly, consider how renewing the wineskins can make a real difference.

What you refresh the wineskin with is a Sophia (wisdom) task. The supple and forgiving wineskin uses an oil of basic essentials. It contains ingredients like love, hope, a big dose of humility, self-respect, “other”-respect, a desire for other persons’ just treatment, inclusive freedom, trusting of – and cooperation with – others, more-than-survivor mentality, courage, common-sense/responsible good.

How you choose the ingredients to soften your wineskin is a Grace task. A task without pre-conditions, like “whether you deserve this or not”! Choose ingredients that intentionally love the other person you’re dealing with in that intersection. That reduces your own emotional brittleness. That reduces your own sense that you deserve more respect than the person you disagree with.

Grace and Sophia already live within your spirits as human being. Stop long enough in the intersection of Faith and Politics to see them on your shoulders. They urge you to embrace the wisdom and the undeserved love of God present in your life. So, pour a bit of the conservative/liberal wine into your glass, and drink to Grace and Sophia!

## SCRIPTURE READINGS: (NRSV)

### Luke 5:36-39

This section of Luke actually begins on vs. 33 with Jesus telling the followers of John the Baptist about the practice of “fasting”, and about when that practice is appropriate for the occasion. When to fast and when to celebrate. We as the church are also called to with wrestle with the appropriateness of our corporate and personal actions. When to confront and when to comfort, when to rejoice and when to grieve. Each of these faithful actions of God are meant to be done with integrity, wisdom and grace. Then Jesus elaborated his point with an earthy parable, a short story with an extended meaning.

**‘No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wineskins into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, ‘The old is good.’”** *(here will be a comment about conservative and liberal notions that can be more complementary than competitive)*

### I Cor. 1:18-19

In this short passage from I Corinthians, Paul focuses on his distinction between foolishness and wisdom. These 2 verses ask about discernment, a word which you’ve heard and used through Andy’s contemplative preaching and teaching.

**(vs. 18-19) “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning is what I want.’** (ref. - Isa. 29:14)

### James 3:13-18

Paul suggests that the passage you just heard from Paul could find a helpful connection with how discernment makes itself known. James and his followers would be familiar with that in all Old Testament wisdom

literature, wisdom is connected to practical good behavior, not speculative thought. Sophia, wisdom, was a down-to-earth dynamic of daily life. About 40 years, a theology professor helped Paul understand the term “Word of God” can validly be described as “the faithful action of God”. He has held on to that for decades, because Paul sees much more than mere Bible words embedded in the term “Word of God”. He see practical, good behavior in our daily efforts. As you listen to James words, try to consider them as the “faithful actions of God.”

**Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.**

**For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in people for those who make peace.**