

August 24, 2008  
Exodus 1:8-2:10  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *Faith and Politics*

Last Monday I went to see the replica of *The Amistad*, which was in Portland for about a week. As many of you know, this vessel is a replica of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish ship that is known because it was the site of a revolt of African captives who were being transported from Havana. In July 1839 the Africans revolted against their captives, seized control of the ship and during the day forced the crew to head for Africa. However at night the sailors secretly turned the ship back toward the Americas. Eventually, the ship was stopped off Long Island by the US Navy, and the Africans were taken to New Haven, Conn. This is where the ironic name of the ship truly came into play. In Spanish *amistad* means “friendship,” a very strange name for a ship carrying human cargo. However, in Conn. the Africans were befriended by some of our congregational forbears, who helped to fight for their freedom. Eventually, the Supreme Court declared the Africans free because it was no longer legal to transport Africans to the Americas for slavery.

On the ship in Portland I met John Kamara, who is one of the crew. He is originally from Sierra Leone, which is where the *Amistad's* African captives were from. He told me that a number of years ago he was offered the opportunity by the United Church of Christ to come to this country to be a part of this “missionary” work of education as he called it, working on the ship. He was

very grateful for the opportunity and very grateful to the UCC for its ministries. When I told him I was a UCC pastor, he told me to tell the congregation how much he appreciates what we do. So, I pass those words on to you.

The human struggle with bondage and slavery did not end in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. People continue to be bought and sold around the world today and many more are held in one kind of economic bondage or another.

We also know that bondage did not begin with the transportation of slaves to the Americas in the early days of our nation. It appears that bondage has been around as long as there have been humans. The struggle with bondage is at the core of the Judeo-Christian story. Moses, the central character of the Jewish story, was born into a community that was in bondage to Egyptian rulers. In the midst of such adversity, however, the story of Moses begins with a miracle - the miracle that he survived at all. Part of his survival was due to the disobedience of a couple of midwives.

Those midwives, Shiprah and Puah, whose names mean beauty and splendor, defy the Pharaoh. This kind of civil disobedience was, and still is, highly dangerous. However, in their case it was not only civil disobedience it was also religious disobedience, since the pharaoh was considered to be “god on earth.”

Shiphrah and Puah defied the 'death dealing' ways of their civil and religious leader and continued in faith in their calling as midwives for new life. While being gentle as doves in relating to the new babies, they were also wise as serpents in relating to the pharaoh. They turned the table on the pharaoh and were shrewdly subversive, as people at the lower end of the power dynamic often have to be. "Mr. Pharaoh, those Hebrew women are so strong they have their babies before we can even get there." In the mysterious world of birthing women, the midwives rule. Living and working within a repressive regime, the shrewd midwives find a strategy for subverting the deathly ways of a dictator. In faith, Shiphrah and Puah act on behalf of life.

In this story of Moses' beginning and in the story of *The Amistad*, we can see the complex interplay between faith and politics.

What are you not supposed to talk about in polite company? Religion and Politics. But in the public arena, as the presidential political season is upon us, there has been a great deal of talk about politics and religion. We have seen candidates endorsed by various religious leaders and those candidates have sometimes later renounced those leaders. We have also seen increased pressure on candidates to talk about their own religious sensibilities, with the implication that those statements are a litmus test for political support. The dialogue between religion and politics have been very prominent in this election season.

Why are we not supposed to talk about religion and politics. Because we know we don't agree. And we know that these

topics will touch on our passions. And we know how hard it is at times to honor one another's religious and political convictions.

An example of this struggle happened this last spring. Douglas Kmiec, a prominent Catholic lawyer, who served in the Reagan administration, is an opponent of abortion and is a political conservative. However, he decided to endorse Barack Obama and was asked to speak to a Catholic gathering about his decision. Before his talk the group celebrated mass. In his comments the priest made it clear that the only choice for faithful Catholics was a pro-life candidate. When Kmiec went forward to receive communion the priest shook his head no and refused to give Kmiec communion. Kmiec and others were stunned. A spokesman for the Cardinal representing that area later said that it was "not within the priest's authority to do this. It was wrong."

(*NPR radio, All Things Considered*, June 2, 2008, Nina Totenberg reporting.)

We have deep convictions about religion and politics. And our differences about these matters are sometimes hard to manage. Yet, as people of faith these are exactly topics we are supposed to dialogue about. As we seek to love God and love neighbor it involves all facets of our lives.

In recognition of Chamberlain Days here in Brunswick a couple of comments about Joshua Chamberlain, who is an interesting example of one whose life at various stages focused on different facets of our lives: he was an academic, a religious man, a military officer and a political leader. He was also choir director here at FPC at one point. He married Fanny Adams, daughter of the

minister at the time and he donated the Memorial window behind the pulpit in honor of George Adams.

I, for one, am very grateful that we are privileged to live in a country that recognizes a separation of church and state. Our country's founders agreed that the state would not be allowed to determine religious practices for the people and also that the church couldn't determine what the state would do. We haven't always lived out the best of those intentions but it is a vision that we hold on to. Those founders knew their European history well. That history is full of stories where those lines of separation were not clear and there were plenty of abuses in both directions.

Many church historians and sociologists believe one of the reasons that the church is so relatively vibrant in this country today and so quiescent in Europe is precisely because of the honoring of this separation. It has made the United States the most diverse and most dynamic place for a wide variety of religious expression. It appears that trend will continue, which means we will need to learn to dialogue more fully not only ecumenically (within the wider Christian community) but also on a interfaith basis, with our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and ??...neighbors. Which is why here at First Parish we had an educational series called "Windows on Islam" last winter, where we had a chance to talk directly with some of our Muslim neighbors here in Maine.

One the other hand, the separation of church and state doesn't mean that each of us doesn't take our faith into our political activities and decisions.

It also doesn't mean that we as the church don't talk about matters that have political implications, like poverty, education, criminal justice and warfare. Which is why we had a "Windows on War" series two years ago.

Yet, in the midst of these conversations and even, at times, arguments, it is important to keep our focus on a larger goal of our life together – and that is the focus of community. Douglas Kmiec in commenting about his experience said that "faith isn't a weapon. Communion is about community."

As the church engaging in dialogue about matters that are both religious and political, I think it is important for us to hold on to a central focus of community. Sometimes people feel that means we find the least common denominator, stick with that and try to avoid everything else. Instead, let us hold to a vision of community where we speak respectfully and listen carefully to one another, knowing that we come from different places. But let us not stop with listening just to one another. Let us deepen our practices of listening for the movement of God's spirit, within us and among us.

Let us be reminded of Paul's vision that our life together in Christ holds us together across many divisions.

*We are neither Jew nor gentile,  
slave nor free,  
male nor female,  
Republican nor Democrat.  
But we are one in Christ.*