

## **Finding your own way**

Matthew 23:1-12

November 2, 2014

Tuesday is election day. Did you know that? How did you know? You haven't received any flyers in the mail or seen any political ads on TV, have you?

\$60,000,000 has been spent on a single race in Iowa, the contest between Bruce Braley and Joni Ernst for the senate seat vacated by Tom Harkin. \$60,000,000! I think that is obscene! Every day I get dozens of emails asking me to donate my \$5 or \$10 or \$100. I guess \$60,000,000 isn't enough ...

Now I can tell you, from this pulpit, how I feel about the huge amounts of money spent on political campaigns and its corrosive effect on American democracy. And I can talk with you, from this pulpit, about a Christian perspective on contentious political issues: immigration reform or racial justice or the social safety net or health insurance. I can remind you that Tuesday is election day and I can even urge you to vote, but I can't tell you how to vote. I can't endorse any candidate. If I did, I'd get in trouble. If I did, I'd get the church in trouble. I would violate the carefully guarded, though sometimes disputed, wall of separation between church and state.

It's ironic that in our day those most vigilant about guarding that wall are the secularists, men and women doing their best to prevent the unwanted intrusion of religion into political and civic affairs. It's ironic because in the beginning, as our future nation was taking shape, the impetus for keeping church and state out of each other's business came from the church! It came from people of faith who had seen for themselves what an unhappy marriage of church and state did to the church, changing it, corrupting it, distracting it, ruining it, draining it of power and meaning and influence.

People like Roger Williams. Roger Williams was the founder of the First Baptist Church of Providence. It was indeed the first Baptist church, the first Baptist church in America, organized in 1638. Like our Pilgrim forebears, Roger Williams was a separatist, emigrating from England to the colonies for the sake of religious liberty, but Roger Williams even separated from the separatists, leaving Massachusetts Bay to establish a new settlement at Providence, intended as a haven for people whose religious convictions made them outcasts elsewhere.

Roger Williams was an interesting man. He was the one who first used the words, "wall of separation." He was a man of deep faith, a man made restless by his faith, always growing, always learning, always yearning for a better way, a truer way. He was a man of deep personal conviction who adamantly defended the rights of others to their own deep personal convictions.

He became fast friends with the people of the Narragansett tribe, learning to respect their ways and their beliefs, objecting to the common colonial practices of confiscating Native American lands and of heavy-handed evangelizing. It was from the Narragansetts that he purchased the land on which the town of Providence was built.

And though he is responsible for birthing the Baptist church in the Americas, Roger Williams himself remained a Baptist for only a matter of months, eventually refusing to affiliate with any church.

These are some of the beginnings of the Baptist church, a church that continues to prize independence and autonomy and liberty of conscience, both for individual congregations and also and especially for individual Christians. The website of the American Baptist Churches USA affirms “the competency of all believers to be in direct relationship with God and to interpret Scripture.” You don’t need someone else to tell you what to believe. You don’t need something else or someone else -- a church or a priest or a religious rite of passage -- to bring you into communion with God. It’s about finding your own way, about coming to faith on your own terms.

And it’s about a “gathered” church, a church “in which membership was voluntary and based on evidence of conversion,” not a church defined by geographical boundaries or community affiliation or circumstances of birth. And the sign? The sign of faith, the sign of personal conviction, the emblem of conversion? Baptism. Believer’s baptism. The sign of belonging because you choose to belong. The sign of faith that you yourself choose to exhibit.

Here, once more, we can see both the virtues and the flaws of the things that make our churches distinctive. The idealism of Roger Williams’ own faith left him without a church family. And the insistence of the Baptist churches on autonomy and personal freedom has led to a church divided against itself many times over: American Baptists, Southern Baptists, General Alliance of Regular Baptists, Primitive Baptists, Missionary Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Original Freewill Baptists, Full Gospel Baptists, Progressive Baptists, and many, many, many more.

But here too is strength, reminding us that our faith is ours to claim, ours to own, ours to live. Ultimately, you do need to find your own way.

Finding your own way. We know something about that, too, don’t we? We share common roots with the Baptists and share with them a commitment to local church autonomy and to the merits of personal conviction. We too believe in finding your own way.

But listen! Listen carefully! Finding your own way is not going your own way. "Going" your own way means going wherever you choose to go! But "finding" your own way? Finding your way? Finding the way? The way is there, you just need to find it. You, you on your own, you need to find the way.

What way? "I am the way." You, you on your own, you need to find Jesus.

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples -- and to us -- urging us to find our own way. Not to follow the way of the Pharisees, not to follow the way of the teachers of the Law, not to follow the way of the movers and shakers of this world, but to find our own way, the way of ... humility.

It is not an easy way to find! I can't just stand here and be humble. That's false humility, staying quiet, taking care not to brag on myself, but hoping, desperately hoping, that somebody else will talk about me and brag about me.

I can't be humble, in and of and by myself. I can only be humble in relationship, because humility is a way of being with others, acknowledging them, valuing them, serving them, helping them ... one person at a time. Being humble means that right now, in this moment, face-to-face with you, you matter.

Being humble means you are not the teacher, but a learner.

Being humble means you are not the father, but a child.

Being humble means you are not the leader, but a follower. Being humble means you find your own way ... by following, by following Jesus.

Carol Teare, pastor at First Baptist Church down the street from us, told me that it is common practice among Baptist churches to close worship with a hymn of commitment. Of course, it is! Because Baptists are all about taking personal responsibility, about owning your faith and acting on it.

And so they end worship with an invitation, an invitation to make a personal response to the word of God, a personal response to God as God has spoken to you through the Word and through Holy Spirit, an invitation to make a decision, to make a commitment, to do ... something! At First Baptist, people are invited to come to the front of the sanctuary during the singing of the last hymn if they wish to accept Jesus Christ, or wish to become a member of the congregation, or wish to make a sign of reaffirming their faith.

That's what they do, but this morning, as we walk the same path with them, we will find our own way ...