

The Stump Speech

by Scott J. Rubin at UUCSV, Northumberland, PA

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I stand before you today as exhibit A for what happens when you open your mouth. A month or so ago, I gave Ann a little unsolicited advice. I said something like: Ann, you're spending an awful lot of time caring for our sick and elderly folks. It's just not reasonable for you to be considered half-time and do all of that and still do two sermons each month. You're going to burn out. You should just back out of a sermon when it gets to be too much.

A few days later, she said something like: You're right. What are you doing on October 31? So here I am.

But I actually had two conditions before I agreed. First, Ann had to assure me that this was a service she normally would do. And second, she had to promise to be here today as a member of the congregation – and not our pastor – so she could recharge a bit spiritually. Ann, you're amazing – thank you for being here for us!

Every two years at about this time of year, I get a little energized and little wistful. I love politics, and especially election time.

I worry, though, that some of you might say that politics doesn't belong in church. I disagree, and that's one reason for the two readings this morning. The Jewish and Christian scriptures are filled with politics. It's impossible to understand religion without understanding politics, and vice versa. The separation of church and state does not mean that one is irrelevant to the other; it means that one is not conditioned on the other.

Nehemiah tells us that all the small cities and towns had to send people to the capital city, Jerusalem, to support the leaders. Someone had to provide their food, care for their animals, help communicate and administer their decrees, and so on. We also can hope that they helped keep the leaders in touch with what the people needed. Today we might call them bureaucrats and hangers-on. But back then, those who volunteered for this duty were blessed by the people back home.

By the time of Jesus, things had changed. The leaders in Jerusalem had lost touch with the people. Jesus told a parable of people renting a vineyard who refused to pay the landowner his rent, and even killed those who came to collect it. Jesus ended that parable with the obvious conclusion: the owner would come back to reclaim his land and throw out the interlopers.

When the priests and leaders realized Jesus was dissing them – the occupiers of the holy temple who had lost touch with the word of God and the will of the people – and that Jesus was suggesting that God and the people would throw out the leaders and reclaim their religion and government, the leaders did what you'd expect from the powerful yet clueless: they sent in some surrogates to try to trap Jesus into illegal conduct. They sent the Pharisees and Herodians – basically the lawyers, lobbyists, and bureaucrats – to try to trick Jesus. But Jesus outfoxed them, with words that would make every tax accountant cringe: “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and render unto God that which is God's”.

So I say that politics belongs in church – it’s been here for thousands of years and there’s no reason to leave it behind now – especially not now, when we need rational, moral, wise leadership more than ever.

And that’s good. Because I do love politics – I have since I was a teenager; maybe even a little before. Isn’t it normal for a kid to stay up on election night with a pad of ledger paper that lists each state and its electoral votes, and a column for each presidential candidate? This was before home computers or, believe me, I would have had a spreadsheet linked to a color-coded map. I was that oh-so-easy-to-raise combination of a political wonk and a numbers geek. I could argue with anyone about anything and I had numbers to back me up! I had the debate trophies to prove it, not to mention the parents pulling their hair out to go with it!

Didn’t every teenage boy rush home from school to catch the last couple of hours of the Senate Watergate hearings? I loved theater and acting, too; but there was no better theater than watching Sam Ervin pretend he was just a little old country lawyer – just a simple fella who went through Harvard law school – and did it backwards no less – starting with the courses for third year students! So there was Sam Ervin, his jowls flapping, teaching me the art of cross-examination. Is it any wonder I went on to become a lawyer?

Back then my twin passions for theater and politics came together, oddly enough, in a show that probably no one but me remembers – in 1971, the writers of “Hair” opened a rock musical version of Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. I never saw the show, but I had the original cast recording and I played it over and over again. There’s one song in that show that I loved – because it was so perfect for the Vietnam War era with President Nixon running for reelection. There’s a slimy, corrupt politician who has this great number where he promises to “bring all the boys back home” from war. And he assures us in his southern preacher style, “I sent ‘em over, I can bring ‘em back. Re-elect me and I’ll bring all the boys back home.”

But I’m digressing. As you can tell, I love this stuff. And growing up I expected to run for office some day. That is, until I realized that there’s no such thing as a shy politician. A politician walks into a room full of strangers and her eyes light up; she’s energized; and she tries to meet everyone in the room and learn a little bit about them, connect with them somehow. It’s called working the room and it’s an essential skill for a successful politician. I’ve seen people do it and it’s very impressive.

I walk into a room full of strangers, I scan the crowd looking for a familiar face and, if I can’t find one, I either leave or find a table in the corner. I simply do not have the right stuff to run for office. Don’t you dare make me go door to door or send me to the chamber of commerce meetings or the golf outings or the umpteenth chicken dinner fundraiser.

Even if I could get over my shyness, I have another problem that would keep me from being a successful candidate. I want to tell people the truth, tell them what I really believe, explain that we have serious problems with no easy solutions. I’ll even tell them the truth about my opponent – if he’s a nice, family person with great kids and values I admire, I’d say that.

So, for lots of reasons – personal, practical, and political – you’re not going to see my name on a bumper sticker or billboard. I can live with that, very happily actually.

But just because I'll never run for office, doesn't mean I don't have a stump speech. You know, the all-purpose stump speech that every candidate delivers dozens, if not hundreds, of times during the campaign. With the election coming up on Tuesday, I thought I'd share it with you today. Frankly, after the season of awful political commercials and dreadful speeches we've just lived through, we need to hear what politics could be like – at least in my make-believe world where everyone respected each other and maybe even shared some basic UU values and principles. A utopian world of politics where success doesn't depend on slandering your opponent or being able to work a room to raise millions of dollars. So here goes: my stump speech called "it's time to stop."

Thank you for being here today. I know you're busy and have many things you could be doing on a beautiful fall morning. The fact that you've chosen to be here, and that many of you have brought your children, means a great deal to me.

I hope you didn't come here to listen to someone say exactly what you want to hear. If you did, you'll be disappointed; but I hope you'll stay anyway. I'm not going to waste your time with platitudes, sound bites, or bumper-sticker slogans. And I'm not going to disrespect my opponent. She's an honorable person who has a long history of public service, and I respect her for that.

But our communities, our country, and our planet face real problems; problems we can solve if we're willing to sacrifice; problems we can manage if we're willing to elect competent leaders who put our collective interests ahead of personal gain.

I know you're struggling. But our biggest problem is not unemployment, or crime, environmental degradation, global climate change, or skyrocketing health care costs. Don't get me wrong, each of those is a serious concern – but each is but a symptom of the real problem: our selfishness.

You heard me right – too many of us selfish, arrogant, disrespectful people and it's harming our children, tearing apart our families, devastating our economy, destroying our communities, and threatening the very survival of our planet. And it's time to stop.

It's time to stop paying CEOs more in a day than the average person earns in a year. Yes, the heads of corporations are well educated, imaginative, highly motivated, and can produce tremendous value for our economy. But they have lost of sight of what's important.

To the corporate elite, I say it's time to stop firing hundreds of people who make your products and serve your customers so you can keep paying multi-million dollar salaries to people who already have more money than they could spend in a lifetime.

It's time to stop paying your people so little that they qualify for government assistance and can't afford to feed their families. Should you be well paid for running your company? Of course. But you also have to pay your workers a living wage and do everything you can to employ more people.

For those of you who may be of a more conservative bent, don't panic just yet. I am not suggesting that government should force companies to reduce the pay of officers. That's not the

role of government. But it's the right thing for companies to do, and their stockholders should insist on it.

And government is not without fault here. Many of our government leaders, senators and representatives and cabinet secretaries, behave like they're royalty. They can do no wrong. Their sycophantic aides kow-tow to them; they drive around in limousines. They have completely lost touch with real people in real communities. They come into office as people of modest means and somehow leave office many years later as millionaires. All the while, many enlisted people in our military qualify for food stamps and can barely support their families. It's time to stop.

It's time to stop borrowing billions of dollars from China. It's time to stop mortgaging our children's future to support our bloated standard of living. It's time to stop pretending that we are doing something useful by moving pieces of paper around, rather than making stuff that people want and can afford to buy.

It's time to stop treating our planet like our personal playground and junkyard. We know, with as much certainty as we can have about such things, that we are destroying our planet. Our climate is changing, the ice caps are melting, storms are becoming more violent, our lowlands are flooding with greater frequency. And yet we continue to spew millions of tons of pollutants into the air, foul our waterways, and pave our farmlands. We do it because we are selfish. It would hurt our way of life to use less electricity, to drive our cars less and walk more, to buy food that isn't trucked half way around the world. We have a responsibility to our children and to our planet. But we have failed. So it's time to stop.

It's time to stop pretending that we are better than, or fundamentally different from, our neighbors. One religion is not inherently superior to another. There is no single path to wisdom; no sole source of justice; no one faith has a monopoly on love or understanding or peace. We are all children of this planet and whatever supreme source created it – by whatever names we choose to call it.

It's time to stop fighting wars in the name of God.

It's time to stop killing each other in the name of peace.

It's time to stop starving the many so the few can eat like gluttons. That is not what our religions teach us, and it is no way to live.

And it's time to stop pretending that accidents of birth make us superior to anyone else. Just because I was born heterosexual does not make me better than my neighbor who was born homosexual. Or that my white skin makes me superior to my neighbor with skin of a darker pigment. Or that I am somehow superior to my neighbor because my grandparents immigrated to this country while my neighbor came here just a few years ago.

We are both children of God; we both deserve to love and be loved. We are both deserving of respect. And we both should have the right to have families that are blessed by our churches and sanctioned by our government. We both should have the right to live where we please, work where we're able, shop where we like, openly care for those we love, and send our children to

schools where they will be respected and educated. Our skin color, place of birth, religious belief, and sexuality may be different – but those differences should enrich us. None of those differences make one of us superior to another. So it's time to stop drawing lines in the sand to separate us; instead we must draw circles in the sand to surround us, embrace our differences, and build vibrant, diverse communities where we can learn from each other.

It's time to stop pretending that killing fetuses is an acceptable form of birth control.

It's time to stop thinking that drug abuse, prostitution, and pornography are victimless crimes.

It's time to stop deluding ourselves into thinking that if we don't talk about sex and love and hatred and violence, then our children won't experience them. We cannot protect them from the world, we must prepare them for it.

Obesity is not epidemic by an act of God, but by our own actions. Gluttony is not a valid lifestyle choice. Health care costs do not need to rise inexorably. There are choices we can and must make. It's time to stop eating ourselves to death.

It's time to stop our ignorance and bigotry about religion. Islamic extremists and terrorists no more represent Islam than the Ku Klux Klan represents Christianity or the Jewish Defense League represents Judaism. Islam is a religion of peace and love and justice that values the teachings of Jesus and Moses. Please build a mosque near the World Trade Center; build a church and synagogue too. Build a multi-cultural center where we can all sit down and have fun together. It is hallowed ground. People of many religions and nationalities and races died in the World Trade Center. We all should honor their sacrifice as a world community.

Well I've covered a lot of ground. Now you may wonder why I'm running for [here you can fill in the blank of the office I'd run for in our make-believe world]. I do not believe that government can solve all, or even most, of these problems. But there are some things only our government and our elected leaders can do.

Only our government can build the roads and bridges and rail systems and bike paths and walkways and sanitation systems that we need to safely move ourselves and our products. It's time to stop pretending that these things last forever and don't need maintenance; or that the only good government building project is a new sports stadium. Our infrastructure is falling apart and we must invest in our future.

Only our government can protect us against those who seek to destroy to us, either here at home or in other countries. We must pay the men and women who risk their lives for us a respectful and living wage, and provide for their families when they sacrifice themselves to protect us. It's time to stop paying more to defense contractors who sit in office buildings than we pay to the men and women who risk their lives on the front lines to protect our safety.

But most importantly – our government can lead the way. Our government officials can lead by example. They can encourage us to see the best in ourselves. They can use what Teddy Roosevelt called the bully pulpit to call out those who are acting selfishly to the detriment of our communities.

Government – acting for all of us – can ensure that it pays its workers a living wage; that it does not unjustly enrich its leaders and decision-makers; that it respects and cherishes our differences; that it makes wise choices about energy and transportation and food; that it honors those who risk their lives for us.

I am running for [whatever office I'm running for] because I believe that a sound government, a refocused government, a government led by men and women of talent and intellect and vision and fortitude can reshape our communities and salvage our planet. I am running for office because I believe it's time to stop.

That's probably where the stump speech would end, unless I was speaking in a church. Then I'd continue with the story of the arrogant, selfish, disrespectful people living in the rented vineyard. Jesus taught us that our leaders must not oppress us; they must represent us and help us act for the good of everyone. When our leaders forget why they're there, forget who they work for, forget to protect the most vulnerable among us, it's time to stop.

And however you feel about all of this, remember to vote on Tuesday ... and then come back to church next Sunday when someone who's probably a little less crazy than me will inspire us to continue improving ourselves and our communities.

May it be so.