



LESSONS IN LIVING

Politics and Professional Wrestling

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 34:1-6 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Ezekiel had a really unpleasant task. He came to his country at a time when it had basically betrayed all of its principles. Isaiah came when there was still time to turn around and his message was what Israel could do to return back to the principles that had made them strong. Ezekiel is coming after that hope is gone. Israel is still there but his unpleasant task is to get people to stop hoping that the same feudal things will keep working and to begin to trust that those principles will still be there for the people after their nation and the things they care for is gone. The passage we are going to look at now comes centuries before that and you see the problem was already there. In fact, I smile and grimace at the same time every time I see this one verse because it really is world history in a nutshell. Here it is:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. (2Samuel 1:1)

I finally realized what this series is, which is kind of sad with only two left. Next week we are going to look at the concept of radical love as being the heart of what people of faith are called to do; to be loved at a radical level deeper than your religion, deeper than your nation, deeper than your social status. We are going to look at the Beatitudes in a very different way as a call to a type of living that is nothing short of revolutionary. But today we are going to look at the problem because if we don't look at that first, if as Americans we don't realize we have been propagandized our whole lives, if we simply try to turn the boat around without dealing with things that we have internalized through our culture and religion, then we carry in our eyes the problem.

Next week we will look at the positive things we can do, but this week we need to do something every bit as important and that is to look inside our own souls and realize the mistaken ideas that many of us have been taught. The verse to me is so revealing. *It is spring, the time when kings go to war.* The weather is beautiful, you don't necessarily have a reason, but spring is the time when you are going to go out and have an adventure. So the king goes to war but somehow also

mysteriously stays in the capital city. Sometimes we forget that in a sense war is a grievance between two or more rich people and then poor people are sent out to pay the ticket for it. The way I want to look at this, which is a sermon I have always wanted to do, is called "Everything I Learned about Politics I Learned from Professional Wrestling." Because you have one level that is presented as what your government is and you have a deeper level of what is really happening. It can be so discouraging and frustrating when you keep believing that surface level and keep getting disappointed.

If you think about what a wrestling promoter has to do, it is very close to what a political advisor has to do. A wrestling promoter has to make you love or hate people on a dime; they have to create villains and then turn those villains into heroes and then turn those heroes back into villains and somehow the crowd has to keep believing it. The very first wrestling match I ever saw was a man named Bulldog Danny Plechas. Is there anybody here old enough to remember Bulldog Danny Plechas? Bulldog Danny Plechas was what they call *the jobber*. He was a guy who was never going to win a match. His job was to make other people look good. That is what he was paid to do. I had a friend that asked me if I would watch wrestling with him and I asked him "don't you know it is fake?" He said "of course it is fake that is what's so funny about it." So we watched and it starts off with an announcer who says, "Ladies and gentlemen please do not bark at The Bulldog." Now see if you can figure out what happened. From the back a man enters. He looks like my father in underpants, barrel bodied with little spindly legs. He must have been sixty five years old. Bulldog Danny Plechas holding his ear because everybody is barking like a dog.

What I realized while watching that match was the first principle of professional wrestling which affects understanding politics in every country throughout time and that is the good guy and the bad guy both work for the rich guy. The good guy and the bad guy both work for the rich guy. Obviously we know they are not really fighting but their whole persona is based on generating money. Have you ever been really disappointed with a candidate that ran for president? When they were running they had all these really high ideals and they talked about things. Do you remember your Republican friends who were so disappointed towards the end of the Bush years? He had said one thing and done another. How about your Democrat friends that now are realizing that the current president is not as advertised? At some point we have to look and realize these are people doing the best they can within a very corrupt system and if we do not turn and look at that system we don't get out of our problem.

One of the issues that is very hard is when kings go to war. They have a very easy bit of propaganda. If you question what they are doing they say you are attacking the troops. This has always been. David is going to send a soldier out to die because he wants the guy's wife. But it is so easy to say if you question anything I am doing or any of the military operations the person you are really attacking is the troops. But did you know that the people who hate war the most are retired soldiers? I could do a whole antiwar speech just on retired generals alone. Did Eisenhower hate the troops when he said that every battleship in a sense is robbed from the poor? Patton, Stonewall Jackson, all of these people loved the troops but hated war. One of the most passionate expressions of that agony comes from Major General Smedley D. Butler. A general who realized at some point that his entire career had been spent enriching a small group of people.

War is a racket. It always has been. A racket is best described, I believe, as something that is not what it seems to be to the majority of the people. Only a small "inside" group knows that it is about. It is conducted for the benefit of the very few, at the expense of the very many. Out of war a few people make huge fortunes. How many of these war millionaires shouldered a rifle? How many of them dug a trench? How many of them knew what it meant to go hungry in a rat-infested dug out? How many of them spent sleepless, frightened nights, ducking shells and shrapnel and machine gun bullets?

One of the things we certainly get from scripture is the call to see the human beings on your side of the line and on the other side of the line and to not let the rhetoric or the fog of war take over that whole enterprise of ethics. The way the prophet says it is incredible passionate. Ezekiel says to the shepherds "You shepherds of Israel have been feeding yourselves. Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool (think of that image for a second coming from the sheep), you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. (And chilling words.) So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered they became food for all the wild animals."

The first rule of professional wrestling and professional politics is to realize that very often the good guy and the bad guy are both working for the rich guy. Early in my career I was not political at all. People who think that is what motivates me have misunderstood what I have been trying to say and do. During the Reagan years, I was looking at the very strange politics where we were supporting South Africa. We were supporting apartheid in South Africa and I was talking to this friend of mine, an international banker, whose wedding I was performing. I told him that it wasn't making any sense to me and there was something going on at a level that I just didn't understand. And he wouldn't get into it but I could tell from his smile that he knew the answer. He said if you ever want to understand what is happening with international politics at peace or war, follow the money. Follow the money. Look at what is there in South Africa, look who has brought you this leader and look for the connections.

Second rule in professional wrestling is that the reason we think the good guy is good is because he likes us. In professional wrestling both sides cheat. The good wrestler will have more cause since he came there to wrestle and the other guy cheated so now he *has* to use the same techniques. But watching the match you can't tell who is good or bad but one of them likes you and one of them doesn't. It is called *cheap heat* in wrestling to get the crowd riled up by insulting the city or state that they live in. I remember in Dallas all these wrestlers that came from other countries still had a Texas accent; (laughter) very mysterious. There was one guy from Russia who said that he had come from Russia to Texas to take the Texas title belt back to Russia where they were going to use it to clean the toilets. Another guy that got cheap heat was called Ravishing Rick Rude. Before he would take off his robe he would look out and say "Now what I want from all you stupid Texans, you lazy, fat stupid Texans, is for you to shut your mouth while I take off my robe and show your wives what a real man looks like." (laughter) For some reason that did not go over very well. On the flip side, Hacksaw Jim Duggan was a great

American and he would come waving the flag. He would always wrestle foreigners and he would have a two by four under one arm and a flag under the other. Whenever he would get in trouble in a hold he would do a certain gesture and the crowd would go "U-S-A! U-S-A!" and he would rally and win. Have you ever been to a political convention where they did that? (laughter) See that is the scary thing. Watch a political convention and shift over and watch professional wrestling and think about what that means. Do you know what John Kerry and Doctor Death Steve Williams have in common? They both entered to the same music, *Born in the USA*.

What I am saying is, if that kind of thing works in one arena it may be working in the other arena too. Why is it that some people are enemies for a while and then all of a sudden they become good? A few weeks back our friend Israel attacks a boat in open waters and kills some of the people in it. The US response is to censor Iran. The response is Iran is evil because they want the same weapons we have. They want the same weapons Israel has. Now I am not trying to get into specifics here so you can disagree with what one thing means or the other but I think the pattern is pretty clear. We like other countries that serve our purposes and we don't like nations who don't.

Third rule, at some level everybody knows professional wrestling is fake. At some level you know in your heart that there is something deeply wrong with what you are seeing on the television set when it comes to electoral politics. At some level you know you need a deeper hope, that you need a more prophetic understanding of what undergirds our lives and our choices. In Dallas, Fritz Von Erich was supposed to be a Nazi. He played football at SMU. He spoke with a very heavy Texas accent but for years he and his brother Waldo were war criminals and then they became heroes. This is confession time. There was a wrestling match in Austin and I saw the poster for it and it had all these old guys. I am thinking these guys must be eighty years old at least but I want to see. So I go to the coliseum and nobody is there, just me (laughter). And this guy pulls up in a taxi and I realize we are about to have a conversation that will determine the stupidest person in Austin (laughter). This guy is what is called *the mark* in wrestling. He is the guy who believes it. He talked about Fritz Von Erich and the claw and how it takes six people to pull the claw off. Fritz Von Erich can't pull the claw off himself. He says he is glad that he doesn't have money because money made all the Von Erich kids go crazy. And he is glad he doesn't have a girlfriend because, as we all know from professional wrestling, women will lead you astray. But when I would ask him questions he would distract from it. He knew at some level that he wanted to believe but it wasn't true. What the prophet is able to do is to find the courage to look steadily at the culture and not ask the question "what do I want to believe" but "what is here?" For years people were saying of George Bush "I think he knows a little more about what is going on than you do." "If you weren't there at that war don't ask questions because you don't know." Now people are doing that with Obama. "I think Obama knows a little more than you do." Well I think Al Capone knows a little more about bank robbing than I do and if you weren't there at that bank robbery then don't tell me about it because you don't know. If you weren't there they you cannot condemn bank robbery. We have to realize that there are principles by which all people need to live.

The word "church" is a poor translation of the word "ecclesia" which in Greek means "called out." The early Christians were those who heard the call outside of their culture, outside of their

economic status, outside the systems of violence, outside the systems of domination, and heard a call to be universal ministers to the world. That is what it means to *answer the call*. You have heard a calling your whole life. Before you heard the voices of propaganda you heard a calling to serve all people. You heard a call to belong to all people. If you feel lost and you want to find your way back it is remembering that, returning to that. Think about the world that you wish for, that you envision, the way the world could be, and then ask the question as seriously as you can, "How do I have to change to become an agent for that kind of world?" Whatever the cost, live that way now. The prophet charged the people of the day and said you don't feed, clothe, mend, or care for the sheep. When Jesus was choosing who would be the leader of the early church he asked three questions. He asked the same question three times to Peter. "Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Do you love me? Feed my sheep."

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