

## Too many bullies fill the pulpits

By TIM O'TOOLE

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As the lines blur between secular and theocratic authority, we have witnessed a proliferation of bully pulpits -- in capitols and cathedrals, city halls and sanctuaries alike.

Theodore Roosevelt first referred to the White House as a bully pulpit, which in his parlance meant a wonderful platform from which to advocate an agenda. Today, bully connotes domineering, intimidating behavior, cruelty and brutality.

Yes, mean-spirited rhetoric abounds in America. Whether it's gay-bashing innuendo, congressional interference in judicial proceedings, media posturing that attempts to eclipse family tragedy, or diatribes that hope to distract us from the sins of the spokesman, the focus is on retribution, not redemption. Too many of our leaders are focused on blaming the victim, not solving the problem.

If Jesus were preaching today, amply funded by a political action committee, with network sound bites from a well-heeled lecture, I wonder how he would spin the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are they who agree with me 100 percent, for they shall be loyal. Blessed are they who condemn the unwed mother, for there is no need for the milk of compassion. Blessed are they who are arrested for driving while intoxicated, for they shall be acquitted. Blessed are the silent majority, for their voice shall be interpreted by the self-anointed. Blessed are the complacent, for their generous contributions shall entitle them to my limited edition DVD. Blessed are they who are thrown into jail because they cannot make bail, for they shall receive free food, public defenders, dental services and cable TV. Blessed are they who are hooked on prescription drugs, for their addiction shall be sanctified.

Blessed are the self-righteous, for they shall be blind to their own transgressions. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst on the South Beach Diet, for they shall seem as Greek gods. Blessed are the heterosexuals, for their promiscuities shall fill the Earth with unwanted children.

Blessed are they who revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you, for great is their reward on Wall Street and offshore bank accounts. Blessed are the combat casualties, for the war on terror requires sacrifices of us all. Blessed are the bigoted, for their hatred shall be justified.

Blessed are the illiterate, for they shall be told what to think. Blessed are the entrepreneurs who take advantage of the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, for they shall enjoy record profits. And blessed are private Social Security accounts, for Solomon in all his glory had no 401(k).

Absurd, you say? This is the new evangelism of talk radio and the West Wing.

Granted, Jesus was most displeased by the money changers in the temple -- ATMs were not yet available. And Jesus was less than thrilled by the Sanhedrin, which conveniently combined religious, civil and criminal law into a pseudo-theocracy, not unlike the "rule of law" that neocons have inflicted on America. But I find it hard to imagine Jesus mouthing such mean-spirited sentiments as abound in right-wing circles, secular or religious.

We expect politicians to manipulate the media and the public to maintain their earthly power. But we should be rightfully distressed when clergy (often self-anointed) transform their sanctuaries into bully pulpits, belittling those who think Christianity involves compassion and forgiveness.

While others condemn the world on prime-time TV, let us, the poor in spirit, break bread together and work toward a better world -- clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, comforting the afflicted. For we are the salt of the Earth and will prevail in the end.

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O'Toole lives in Albany and is a Presbyterian deacon and church Webmaster who takes his satire seriously.