A more intimidating setting is difficult to imagine: eighteen powerful politicians in high-backed leather chairs, each accompanied by an entourage of partisan aides, peering down from the dais at the witness table. Microphones poised to capture every word. Bright camera lights blinding those providing testimony. Pushy reporters ready to pounce on any controversy.

President of Chicago Theological Seminary, professor of theology, translator of original Greek texts into the English versions of the Bible, author/editor of multiple books on contemporary religious life – Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite is a formidable presence in any room, including the chambers of Congress. An articulate spokesperson, she is not one to wilt under pressure.

Called before the Senate Judiciary Committee in the matter of the confirmation of John Roberts as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, she provides the panel with sixteen pages of researched reason – thoughtful insights into the promised protections from tyranny written into the Constitution, the theological thinking of its framers, the continuing value of its prohibition against the establishment of any one religion by the state, the deeply held convictions of the prophetic and progressive faith traditions, and the critical importance in our modern pluralistic society for the Supreme Court to guard freedom of religion for every one of every faith through strict adherence to the First Amendment’s guarantees.

But staunchly conservative Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama doesn’t like what he hears. Neither would the religious right, a constituency whose interests he champions in the halls of Congress. Accordingly, he decides not to engage Thistlethwaite in respectful dialogue, but rather attempt to entrap her in a series of hot button issues.

“Ms. Thistlethwaite,” Sessions begins. Not “Rev.” or “Dr.” or “Professor” or “President” – no title to acknowledge her ordination or education or experience or expertise. “Ms. Thistlethwaite, just yesterday a district court ruled that the Pledge of Allegiance, which has ‘under God’ in it, is unconstitutional. Do you have an opinion about that?” Thistlethwaite turns the question around: “Well, I’m very interested, Senator Sessions, to know whether you think people will be increased in their faith if they just say those words repetitively. I don’t know
what the goal is if it is not to establish a deistic religion. As I’m citing from the founders, God doesn’t need your help.”

“Well, what about…” Since the first question didn’t work, Sessions tries another. “I guess you would further say that we should take ‘In God We Trust’ off the coins?” Susan decided to go with Jesus on that one. “Do I think it’s a good idea to confuse Caesar and God?” she asks the senator. “No, I don’t. ‘Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s.’”

Having failed twice to catch her up, he decides to throw her a real curve ball: “You would oppose then the chaplain of the United States Senate?” “Pardon me,” the renown seminary president replies. Perhaps sensing he finally has her cornered, the senator bears down on his prey. “Do you oppose the position of chaplain of the United States Senate?” “Do I think you all need spiritual guidance?” Thistlethwaite counters. The entire chamber breaks into laughter. Having met more than his match, the posturing senator may even have uttered a secret prayer of thanks when the red light indicated his time had expired.¹

In the scripture assigned for today, the confusing and often conflictive contemporary issue Senator Sessions and President Thistlethwaite debated, regarding the correct relationship between the church and the state, is raised directly.

At this point in the books of Samuel, King David is at home in his new capital, Jerusalem, renamed after himself the City of David. All twelve tribes acknowledge him as the head of state. Enemies defeated, no wars are being fought. Lying around in his plush palace, enjoying the fragrant aroma of its cedar construction, trying to figure out what great thing he could do next, it occurs to King David that it is just not right for him to enjoy living in such luxury while God is stuck in a tent. Why not build God a great temple in which to live, a big beautiful sanctuary like the world has never seen? That certainly would be a project worthy of a king. But, perhaps remembering what happened when he tried moving the Ark of the Covenant, King David decides to first check with Nathan, the prophet of God, to see if he agrees it’s a good idea.

Initially Nathan concurs, only to change his mind after sleeping on it. The next morning the religious leader returns to the palace of the political leader to tell him God does not want the king to build a temple for God to live in, that God has never asked any political leader of any tribe to ever build a house of cedar for God to live in, that God actually prefers living out with the people, where God is free to move separately from the political trappings of any nation.

Then Nathan delivers a second word from God to David. The prophet pointedly reminds the king that he was not anointed to national leadership to build a temple but to shepherd the people, to focus on their real needs, to attend to their safety and security needs, yes, but also to their need for health and welfare, their need for justice and peace, their need for shalom.

I know, the passage ends by saying David wasn’t to build the temple because God wanted Solomon to do it. But biblical scholars point out those verses were not part of the original story. They were added later -- much later -- as a justification or rationalization for King Solomon doing what God had told the prophet Nathan to tell King David that God did not want done.

Be that as it may, what this text teaches with respect to the relationship between religion and politics is twofold. First, a separation is needed between the two, a dis-entanglement, so they are not in bed together. Second, this separation is not so that we live schizophrenically, torn between sacred and secular worlds, but rather so that we can live holistically, with the spiritual serving as the conscience in society’s heart, ever reminding the government of God’s vision of shalom for everyone, ever confronting civic leaders when their policies and programs and personal actions depart from God’s revealed will, ever free to follow God’s law and love, especially when political plots and plans are out-of-sync with God’s righteousness and mercy.

This week a criminal complaint was unsealed charging Maria Butina, 29, with “conspiracy to act as an agent of the Russian Federation within the United States.” This alleged Russian spy apparently was sent by the Kremlin to establish communication back-channels between their and our political leaders. Photographs show her at the Presidential Inauguration, with an official Russian delegation in the Oval Office, standing alongside various Senators, Representatives, and Governors. Much has been made of her connection with the NRA. What caught my attention was her picture at the National Prayer Breakfast. Why would a Russian spy attend a prayer breakfast? Evidently it had nothing to do with the Russian Orthodox faith.

The Rev. Abraham Vereide had been leading prayer groups in Congress for about a decade when, in 1953, those House and Senate prayer groups invited President Eisenhower to join them for prayer and fellowship over breakfast. The National Prayer Breakfast was born, funded by The Fellowship Foundation, also established by Rev. Vereide.

In the 1970s, Paul Weyrich, a primary architect of the religious right movement, conceived the idea of bringing multiple conservative religious organizations to this breakfast to use it as an opportunity to capture the ear of legislators and to lobby for certain social causes.

Today the National Prayer Breakfast gathers 3000 to 4000 people, ostensibly to pray for our country and its leaders, but actually for a full week of lobbying of the political right by the religious right. Because Christian nationalists perceive Mr. Putin to be an anti-homosexual ally, the Russian Federation receives 50 invitations and, according to Dartmouth Associate Professor Jeff Sharlet, uses the event as “a backdoor to American power,” through which they can establish relationships with legislators without “having to go through the State Department and normal vetting processes.” Maria Butina promised a U.S. official she would bring “VERY influential” Russians to the breakfast. She also direct messaged a Russian official: “I am following our game. I will be connecting the people from the prayer breakfast to this group.”

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The National Prayer Breakfast is a scandal, not simply because it appears to have been used by a Russian spy for subversive purposes, and not just because it costs $1.4 million to put on, but because it represents the worst abuses which can arise when religion and politics become entangled, when religious leaders use their positions of trust to pursue power and privilege and their own personal agendas, and when political leaders can use their influence and persuasion to seduce the faithful into their base, even if it means having to set aside moral and ethical norms of behavior previously proclaimed as God’s demands.

A wall of separation between church and state needs to exist, so that the church is protected from the power of the state, so that the church can name the name of such sinfulness, and so that the church can call the state back to its God-given vocation of caring for God’s children.

With respect to this wall of separation, within our own Congregational and Unitarian roots lies the story of John Winthrop, who was elected four times as the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In the spring of 1630 he brought a fleet of 11 vessels and 700 Puritan passengers from the Old World and delivered his famous “city set upon a hill” sermon to them, declaring that they were called by God to establish a holy commonwealth ruled by divine law as they understood it to be set forth in the Bible. But his entanglement of church and state proved to be oppressive.

A year later, in 1631, Roger Williams also sailed into the Massachusetts Bay Colony, taking his first job as an assistant minister at First Church in Boston. Hardly off the ship, he took on Governor Winthrop’s attempt to turn the colony into a Puritan theocracy, refusing to back down even at his trial. Declared Williams:

I do affirm it to be against the testimony of Christ Jesus for the civil state to impose upon the people a religion, a worship, a ministry. The state should give free and absolute permission of conscience to all... Your breath [Governor] blows out the candle of liberty in this land.

Williams was banished from Massachusetts. He left to found and to become the first Governor of the Rhode Island Colony, where citizens would enjoy “a haven for the cause of conscience,” because he built there “a wall of separation” between church and state.

Psalm 99 opens with “The Lord is sovereign; let the peoples tremble!” Sometimes I find myself trembling when I allow myself to think about the present unhealthy entanglement of religion and politics. I tremble when I think of some of the things religious people are doing in and to this country in the name of God. I tremble when I think of how easily they have abandoned former moral and ethical positions in order to accomplish quite ungodly ends. And I tremble when I think of the responsibility God has entrusted to us to act as a conscience for this nation, to stand tall and strong in the pursuit of true justice and real compassion, and to persevere in the struggle to bring our own country back to the realization that our nation exists by God’s providence, is called to follow God’s revealed will, and falls under God’s judgment.