



SUNDAY SERMON

Reconciliation in a Bleak Time

It feels like a bleak mid-winter - these chilly gray February days, but not because of the weather. To me, the landscape of our body politic feels bleak, roiled by conflict, uncertainty, fear and anger. There are brief punctuations, flashes of courage, moments of insight and truth-telling, but otherwise, no. Daily we are outraged by egregious over-reach, cascades of lies. We look ahead to possibly more of the same, months or years more and wonder how we and our country, resilient as it is, can bear it.

I don't intend to preach politics per se, but rather how we tend to our hearts and souls in such a fraught political time. I walk my dog with a friend most afternoons, and except for comparing notes on cooking and restaurants, which we both adore, we do talk politics, and all it does is work us up into an angry rant. We curse, we use darker and darker adjectives, we turn into the scathing critics using cruel epithets that we ourselves deplore. This is not good for our souls, and I don't feel right after these conversations. Except we're alone in the woods; we're not at the dinner table or here in church, and I find myself wanting to vent and say out loud how outraged I am. But then, after that, I just feel helpless and diminished, because I could be better than this. I imagine some of you have similar experiences. We wonder, how can we be constructive, positive, hopeful as we survey our body politic?

And so, I find some comfort and guidance in what Paul and Jesus have to say to us from so long ago. I think both readings are pointing at reconciliation, at how God can work through us to bring us together and make a better world if, and only if, we are willing to work together across differences. Both readings call us out for our sins, but both also reach to our better natures.

In the reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul validates my behavior on the dog walks as described above. I'm simply human, and as such, jealousy and quarreling and the like are natural inclinations. But Paul says we can do better. We can move from baby food, from milk, to solid, grown-up food. We are not to identify purely with a particular individual, either Paul himself, or Apollo or whatever party or sect or candidate we embrace. We are rather to acknowledge that God can work through a variety of people. And then Paul changes to a gardening metaphor to clarify. We plant and water the soil, but God gives the growth. We should have the common purpose of living God's love in the world, and we may go about this in different ways, and with various leaders. In the light of our current dis-ease, I hear this as a message against extreme partisanship and a call to look for common values on which we can agree and work together. What people out there can help us do that; what people can be channels for healthy growth as a nation?

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DATE

Epiphany 6
Sunday, Feb. 16, 2020

PREACHER

The Rev. Susan Flanders

Michael Gerson spoke fluently about this kind of politics in a recent op ed column in the Post. He said "Whatever ideologues may claim, politics is not about making the other side disappear. It is about building coalitions and making incremental progress. And so any party that seeks ultimate ideological victory is not merely encouraging division; it will find itself unable to succeed in actual politics, even when it wins elections."

In the Gospel, we also hear a message of reconciliation from Jesus. He calls out all manner of sinful behavior, everything from murder to adultery, to swearing, and not keeping promises.

(Sidebar here - Jesus says that whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. I was telling Bill about this and mentioned that in Jesus' eyes, Bill, being married to me, a divorced woman, would be an adulterer. And Bill replied, without missing a beat "Yes, and I've enjoyed every minute of it!")

Back to Jesus. He covers a wide range here, not a list of equivalent sins, and he suggests some extremely harsh remedies. But I think his point is to get beyond sin and blaming, to be reconciled, to check our anger, and Jesus makes it really clear what happens when we don't. He says this: "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown in to prison, and you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." That's what escalation does, that's what vengefulness and games of bitter payback lead to, and we must not allow ourselves to be sucked into them or support those who so indulge. This kind of animosity is sickening to our souls, sickening to our national life, a betrayal of the most core value of all - love of neighbor.

Our scriptures call us to account in these anxious, angry times. I know I should be doing better, tending to my upset more positively. I should be thinking about what kind of a citizen and what kind of a Christian I am. After all, the kind of citizens we all are does finally determine the kind of government we have, the quality of our wannabe democracy.

And so a column by the movie critic Ann Hornaday got my attention a couple of weeks ago. It was about a documentary film about Clarence Thomas entitled "Created Equal." She went to the film with a pretty dim view of the man called The Quiet Justice, and the movie didn't change her views of his opinions. But this is what she found important about her experience with the film. It got her out of her silo. In watching Thomas' back story, and the wounds of racism on him as he grew up, she came to at least understand this man and his contradictions, even as she recognized that this was a one-sided portrait, told solely from Thomas' point of view. Hornaday reminds herself how much she enjoyed the equally uncritical films about two women she admires, Anita Hill and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and thus realizes she should be able to find value as well in this one-sided portrayal of someone with whom she differs so strongly. I thought this was so insightful, such a great example of how we can open our minds and listen to opposing perspectives.

Lent is soon upon us - just ten days off. It occurs to me that as the election season heats up in earnest with actual voting in primaries beginning, we might think about what we want to give up or take on as citizens. What does it mean to be a faithful voter, a values voter rather than a purely partisan voter? Surely it doesn't mean slavish allegiance to a party. Surely it doesn't mean staying home if candidates don't appeal to you. Surely it doesn't mean writing in your own name on the ballot as my brother actually does - thus throwing away his vote.

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What if, instead, we approach voting and perhaps supporting candidates with our money, or our time, as a spiritual discipline? What if we spend time in prayer, in meditation about how we'll vote. We could start with what we feel our own needs are in terms of how our country is run. What do we want our government at each level to do or not do? Then we could expand the scope of our prayers to needs beyond our own to our own best dreams for what our country could be like. For how it could be more democratic, more fair, less divided. And what happens if we pray silently for a time, each day, before or after exposing ourselves to the latest news flashes?

I'm ready to try some of this focused praying as a way to keep my mind and heart open and my spirit more calm. I believe this kind of practice can be a powerful and effective tool for shaping our spirits as we move into both Lent and the intensity of our electoral season.

Beyond prayer, we can educate ourselves - get beyond each day's bright shiny object, each new poll, each new prediction of doom or victory for one candidate or another. There is in-depth, thoughtful reporting available from people across the political spectrum, and like Anne Hornaday, we can venture out of our silos and echo chambers to find out what is being written and said elsewhere. Instead of being stuck in our outrage, we can discuss information with our spouses, our children, our parents, our friends - perhaps designating a particular time each week when we'll try to talk across divides and discover where we agree, even when we think we're on opposite sides.

And get rid of sides! For years, I've felt that politics in this country is treated like an athletic event - always a win-lose, up down affair, a battle, with all the language of fight and combat that go with war. Politics should not be that. It should rather be a process, and I would venture a sacred one, by which the millions of people of a great and diverse nation work to reconcile differences and elect representatives who know how to compromise and how to use the legislative process to do things that are good for our country as a whole. Perhaps we can come to see that in exercising our citizenship responsibly and faithfully, we can be channels for God's work in the world.

We are no longer children, and our political life is neither a sport nor a playground game. We need solid food to nourish us so that we can get clear on our values and vote in accordance with them. But perhaps most important of all is to honor the chief value of all - the commandment from Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves. As long as rancor and outrage define our politics, we're just going along with the crowd, just sinking into the mire with the rest.

Preparing this sermon has suggested three things that I need to do. First, I need to take more care in where I focus my attention. There is so much good in the world, so much caring and creativity, so many people whose lives really do embody God's love, and I should look to them and consciously avoid giving too much of my attention to whom and what is toxic in our public life. Second, I should stop with the ranting on the dog walk - very difficult as I ruefully admit to finding it fun. Third, and even more difficult, I might sit down with one of my sons and his wife and listen to what they have to say. We are not estranged, but their views are different from mine, and I suspect their votes are as well, so we never talk about it. And yet, we love each other, and perhaps we can learn from each other - perhaps we can be reconciled - maybe not by changing each other's minds, but by embracing this area of disagreement into the larger framework of our love. Embracing our disagreement into the larger framework of our love.

Writ large - how can we embrace our areas of disagreement with our fellow citizens into the larger framework of our love for this country and our longing for a more peaceful nation. Jesus calls us to be reconciled, may we strive to answer that call - as citizens and as Christians trying to live God's love. Amen.