

Pentecost 26, Proper 28, November 13, 2016 St. Augustine's Freeland Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

In American democracy there are always going to be winners and losers. Generally – until now, at least – one of the hallmarks has been the peaceful nature of our electoral system. There have been boundaries that have contained political discourse. For perhaps two decades, the boundaries have become more and more stretched. Opinions about each candidates' positions, their strengths and weaknesses, mistakes and successes – all that is perfectly fine within the context of our election process. What has changed in this election cycle is that the boundaries of acceptable behavior haven't just been trespassed upon, they've been shattered. **The language used by Mr. Trump and his surrogates during the campaign was consistently outside the bounds of accepted political discourse – Republican or Democrat – in the United States of America.** This violation of our democratic process has opened up a Pandora's Box that is going to be very difficult to close. It has stoked the fires of anger and incited emotional, psychological, and physical violence, horrifying Democrats and Republicans of good will alike. A large segment of America is gripped by fear, while another segment clearly feels empowered to express hatred and intolerance.

This is a matter of concern for all people of faith, no matter our political persuasion. Left unchallenged/unchecked – esp. by those who now hold the reins of government – the strife we are currently seeing is only going to get worse.

I have personally not encountered such a level of felt trauma since 9/11. As my wife – who is a board-certified hospital chaplain and a trained critical incident responder – said: “I am observing [a remarkable trauma] response in women, minorities and LGBTQ persons....Their experience of despair, grief and emotional shock exactly parallels the trauma response of victims of disaster.” Just since Tuesday:

- The national Suicide Hotline has experienced more calls from suicidal people than at any time since 9/11. They're mostly from the minorities that have been targeted during and since the election cycle.
- There's been a surge in hate-speech against these minorities - more than 200 hundred cases of hate-based election-related harassment were reported in the 48 hours after Tuesday's election. One example is near to home: an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Los Angeles had a printed note left under his car's wipers that said: “Dear Fr Homo, how does it feel to have Trump as your president?” The note continued with language I'm not going to repeat, and ended with “America's going to take care of your faggity ass.”
- There have been a couple of assaults of Trump supporters, and many more physical assaults of minorities. Just one example: a gay man was attacked and beaten in Santa Monica on election night by a group of white men, one of whom screamed “We got a new president you f\*cking faggots” as he smashed a beer bottle over this man's head – he had to be hospitalized.
- Racist graffiti has appeared in high schools across the country. Swastikas are much in evidence.

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happening rather than the “rumor of [a] war,” don’t you think? And it certainly feels like the stones that make up the temple of our national cohesion are being threatened, if not thrown down.

What’s a Christian to do?

Not run and hide, says Jesus, nor dismiss what we’re seeing as an anomaly. No matter which side of the political aisle we find ourselves, this time is one which presents us as Christians with an opportunity to proclaim by word and example just exactly what it is that we believe about God, this world, and everyone and everything in it AND to act on that belief.

Franciscan friar Fr. Richard Rohr, who is director of the Center for Contemplation and Action, said on Friday that this fear I’ve just described ***“is felt deeply by those who are most vulnerable in our country.”*** ***“As a follower of both Jesus and Francis,”*** he said, ***“my primary moral viewpoint is not based in the well-being of those who are on top but first in those who are at the bottom.....the vulnerable who have now been rendered more vulnerable.”***

It’s easy to think of those “at the bottom – the vulnerable” ***only as*** those who are poorest financially, even if it is true that the poorest financially are at the bottom. But that’s not so. That group, “the vulnerable” is anyone who’s NOT within the dominant group of our culture: minorities in terms of race, sexual orientation, gender as well as finances. It’s these folk that we are called to support, represent, protect and to listen to, especially at this time those who are so fearful. As my wife wrote last week, “their perspective is valid. Listen [to them]. Resist the temptation to ‘cheer them up.’ Fear is not a fault to overcome. It is an insight into the strength held in reserve for just this moment.”

Our faith should always underpin how we act, or its not a real faith. Integrity matters. When Rohr talks of a “moral viewpoint” he means “a perspective that comes as the result of being a person of faith.” More simply put, he’s describing a person who trusts and follows Jesus.

What does that look like? Earlier this week Leonard Cohen died. If you’ve never heard Leonard Cohen – well, I feel sorry for you! He was one of the great poetic singer/song-writer of this age; a Jew who spent five years in a Buddhist monastery learning about The Way. In 2001, he described Christianity – or perhaps the relationship between Christians and Jesus – in this way: ***“As I understand it,”*** he said, ***“into the heart of every Christian, Christ comes, and Christ goes. When, by his Grace, the landscape of the heart becomes vast and deep and limitless, then Christ makes His abode in that graceful heart, and His Will prevails. The experience is recognized as Peace. In the absence of this experience [of peace] much activity arises, divisions of every sort. Outside of the organizational enterprise [ – the Church – ] which some applaud and some mistrust, stands the figure of Jesus, nailed to a human predicament, summoning the heart to comprehend its own suffering by dissolving itself in a radical confession of hospitality.”*** (Internet conversation, quoted by Brian McLaren)

If we can embrace that identity we have the foundation for reconciliation in this nation – but more is asked of us:

Rohr links that identity with the action we're all called to engage in. He says that “[g]rounding social action in contemplative consciousness is not a luxury for a few, but surely a cultural necessity. Both the Christian religion and American psyche now need deep cleansing and healing, and I do not say that lightly. Only a contemplative mind can hold our fear, confusion, vulnerability, and anger and guide us toward love.”

I'm struck particularly by the combination of the two – of the contemplative consciousness and of social action – that they must go hand-in-hand. Our faith is barren if its only about the contemplative consciousness; our actions lack the strength of a strong moral viewpoint if they aren't rooted in that sort of profound connectedness with the Spirit that comes from a prayerful relationship with God. We cannot allow the sort of hate-filled, violent, abusive behavior that we've seen over the past days to continue without challenging it; yet to do so with integrity means that we use the context and content of our faith as our moral compass.

So where is God in all of this? There were some – many? – Jews who, after the Holocaust lost their faith. “If God didn't intervene to prevent the murder of 6 million Jews and 4 million others by the Nazis, how can there be a God?” They wondered. The Freedom of people of faith is different than the freedom we hope to experience as citizens of this nation. To live in God's freedom means that we have been handed full responsibility for the stewardship of all creation. That responsibility to act, placed on us, establishes the means by which God intervenes in our world. **God intervenes though us. If God is not present it is because we have not acted to make God present.**

Lastly, I'd say that there is hope! Isaiah proclaims hope amid the ruins of a destroyed Jerusalem. Reconciliation is possible . We can make it happen, but only through action, not through passivity. The ugly face of bigotry and hatred masks a human being hurting and lost, projecting onto others their own fears and sorrows. If we say we value community – and our nation is a community – then we have to recognize that they are our neighbors, that, in the words of Quaker Parker Palmer, “*Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.*” Any response on our part as Christians to the actions I've described demands that we respect both the victim AND the perpetrator, even as we challenge the latter's behavior – **to do anything else is to lose ourselves.**

And so we go about our daily tasks, mindful of the struggles that lie before us because of the responsibility placed upon us; we have the wisdom of the saints to guide us, the strength of the Spirit to hold us up, the promises of God to hold us fast, and each other to share in the journey, following our Savior Jesus. This is how we must move forward as Christians in this fractious and difficult time.

Let us pray: Most holy God, give us strength to face the days to come in knowledge that you are with us every step of the way. May we be open to your Spirit's guidance, reaching out to the vulnerable and standing with them in their times of trial. May we be willing to receive the gift of your words and a wisdom that none of our opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. Help us to take up the responsibility for your Kingdom in this place and in our world, that we may never weary in doing what is right. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus. Amen.



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