

The 6th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8. St. Augustine's ini-the-Woods Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 Psalm 16 Galatians 5:1,13-25 Luke 9:51-62

Last Friday our endowment got hit with a more than 600 point drop in the stock markets. As you all probably know, it's because the British – or a certain part of that nation – voted to leave the European Union. The way that happened is significant for us as people of faith, so we should pay attention to it.

Those who voted to leave were older, white, more men than women, blue collar, and from the industrial heartlands of England. Those in the south-east – London and it's surrounding communities – in Scotland, and in Northern Ireland voted to stay.

As has been pointed out, that vote is the long-term result of the 2008-09 financial crash. The people with money have done just fine in the intervening years, but those at the bottom haven't – they're still experiencing the pain and anguish of their diminished circumstances. The vote was the first opportunity for those who continue to experience the hardship of gross financial manipulation to express their anger, their rage, at those who (perhaps because they're doing just fine) said “stay the course, business as usual.”

When times like this happen in human history there are a couple of different directions that communities can take. One is a socialism that seeks a more egalitarian, peaceful society. The other is a populist, nationalist tribalism that frequently expresses itself in violence – to lash out, to find someone to blame, a convenient villain or scapegoat. In Britain, populist demagogues – manipulative politicians – were more than willing to deliver a villain: “It's all the fault of the immigrants,” they said. “If we could just keep them out.....! As one journalist opined, “The English Channel is wider today [than it was last Wednesday].”

Financial crisis. Years and years when the ordinary working person seemed to be descending into poverty. The threat of an internal unpatriotic group “not like us.” And then along came a populist demagogue. The country was 1920's Germany, and his name was Adolf Hitler. The distance from populist, nationalist tribalism to authoritarianism is a very short one in any country. It was so in a liberal democracy like early 20th Century Germany, and that truth hasn't changed with the passing of the years.

There is a form of what some have called “British Exceptionalism” that has always invited those who are in a state of confusion, dismay, alienation, anger, to want to “take our nation back.” We inherited that from the British. You can find this “Exceptionalism” in Shakespeare's Richard II in a speech from John of Gaunt. I've taken the liberty of changing a couple of words:

“.....This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself,
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set [between] the silver sea[s],

Which serve it in the office of a wall,
or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,
This blessed plot, this earth,
this [land of patriots, this America.]”

The cry of “Make America Great Again” comes from there. It’s extremely seductive if you feel aggrieved, unequal, taken advantage of, alienated, if your job has been shipped overseas, or to others who are “not like you.” It seems pretty clear that the “Leave” people in Britain voted against their own self-interest, and did so with a sort of angry triumphalism, for exactly this reason.

If the average person in our nation continues to get poorer, and the less-than-one-percent continue to get richer, our nation’s life will become (has already become?) easy prey for populist demagogues, and our pluralist, outward-looking democracy will become easy prey for authoritarianism.

And so we come to today’s readings! I’ll bet you wondered if we’d ever get here! The readings propose a form of leadership and community that reflect the values of faith, not of self-centered egotism.

Elijah and Elisha’s story is one of an orderly transfer of prophetic authority and power, a “changing of the guard.” They were more institutional prophets – aligned with monarchy and political leadership. In particular, Elisha’s ministry included “speaking truth to power” on behalf of the powerless, and proclaiming God’s justice in the face of human evil to the national institutions of which he was a part. Of course he’d need a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit! From the time of Elisha the transfer of wealth from the ordinary peasant to the wealthy elites in Israel and Judah picked up pace. The rich got much richer, the poor became destitute. Within one hundred years it was so bad that Amos, Micah, Hosea, Isaiah stood outside the political elites and warned of the consequences – of what would happen – if the way the peasants were being treated didn’t change; proclaiming justice in the face of tyranny, fairness in the face of exploitation, community in the face of self-centered isolation. What are we, as people of faith, to say in the face of the great injustices in our own nation? When some still can’t get basic healthcare, or adequate housing, or healthy food? Where not all children have access to good schools, where we have the highest infant mortality rate of any developed nation? Are we not, in Micah’s words, to “do justice, and to love kindness?” (Micah 8). And what about that wall? Leviticus (19:33) says this: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.” He speaks for all Old Testament Judaism and all New Testament Christianity.

To paraphrase Amos: *Woe to you who devised credit default swaps at parties, and conspired over sub-prime mortgage loans. For you lined your pockets while the people’s houses were foreclosed upon, you laughed while they lost their retirement funds. You spent your time feasting at expensive restaurants and being driven around in chauffeured limousines while the people were forced to go to food banks and walk to the unemployment offices.....*

The theme of exploiting, oppressing and attacking those “not like us” – from the Jerusalem Jewish perspective “aliens and strangers” – reappears in the Gospel. That this issue is tied to money should not surprise us: the 1st Century backdrop to Jesus’ ministry – and his ministry itself – was the same concentration of wealth and wide-spread poverty that provoked Amos, Micah and their fellow prophets. It’s why he talked more about the misuse of money than about anything else.

Today, we hear about his journey from the Galilee to Jerusalem by the quickest way – through Samaria. Remember that Jerusalem Jews and Samaritan Jews hated each other. Because Jesus and his group were going to the Temple in “Jerusalem,” Luke says, and not the temple on Mt. Gerizim – the Samaritan Jews’ temple – then the Samaritan villagers would have known that they’re Judean Jews, not Samaritan Jews. Their response – not surprisingly – was to reject Jesus and his followers. And in the heat of rejection, Jesus’ disciples wanted to call down violence on them, wanted to kill them. It’s not hard to hear the excuse: “they’re not like us!” Jesus’ response was to “rebuke them.” Violence, anger, rejection, scapegoating, these are not to be the hallmarks of any of his followers. It would have been so easy for him to have agreed with his disciples. But this is a different form of leadership, inviting a different form of community. Jesus’ actions and words then inform us now, inviting us as people of faith to promote a local and national community that doesn’t embrace violence, anger, rejection, scapegoating.

That’s what Paul was dealing with. In the face of a community that was engaging in destructive behavior, Paul presented his list of the things that, for all people of faith, build-up community: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” This is Spirit-filled living! This is the call of a leader to live in a particular way. When we see and hear some in our nation proposing a “me-first-and-always” attitude that pays no attention to the least and the lost among us, that blames the poor for being poor, and is more than happy to get cut-rate gardening from people who don’t look like us but then wants to put them behind a wall – when we see and hear this sort of rhetoric, Paul’s words challenge us to do more than shake our heads and turn away. If we are to be disciples we have a responsibility to live out of these values AND to challenge the shrill populist voices of fear and manipulation and the attitudes they propose. To do otherwise is to fail in our Christian responsibility.

Christian identity is not interchangeable with authoritarianism, as much as the dictators wish that it might be. Nor is Christian identity nationalist, or tribal, it is and we are called to be inclusive and egalitarian, caring of others – especially the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the foreigner. True Christian community is built on “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

As we journey forward in this fractious time, our faith calls us to remember who we are – Children of God – and to place love at the center of all we do, to make compassion our guide, and justice our watchword, that we may deserve the name “Christian” in this land of majestic purple mountains and amber waves of grain.