

Healing the Heart of Our Democracy (Part 2)

Isaiah 58:6-12

As I watched the inauguration ceremony on Friday, I heard—maybe you did too—Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, pray in the words of the Beatitudes, Jesus’ signature sermon, the one that says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, and the meek, and those who struggle for justice.” Jesus’ sermon that is all about compassion, dismantling barriers, living humbly. I thought it was a good prayer for that moment, a reassuring reminder that we share values that will move this country toward reconciliation, humility, a common humanity. I thought, good for him. Good for President Trump.

I googled Rev. Rodriguez later Friday morning. The first thing that came up was a video of him entertaining a Christian audience by belittling the leaders of other faiths who had been invited alongside of him to lead prayers at another public event. Scoffing at how ridiculous it was to think that prayers of Islam and Judaism might have any power at all next to Christian prayers. I was so disappointed that a man who shares my faith tradition, and who turns to the same words I do in a critical moment, could hear the message of those words so differently from the way I do.

These are strange days in our country. Days in which it’s hard to separate our political opinions from our faith, to remember that no political party’s agenda captures God’s vision. And equally hard to put our spiritual lives and our politics together, to remember that before we are Democrats and Republicans, conservative or liberal, we are followers of Jesus. It’s hard to be both politically engaged and as loving and forgiving and open-hearted as our faith reminds us to be.

Or maybe you think that politics and religion should *never* be put together, even enter the same thinking and speaking space. Let’s talk.

Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown, Nazareth. “I have come [he said] to side with the poor, to set the prisoners free.” Good, strong words. We hear in them God’s intention for the good of humanity. But those words were also a political speech—and Jesus’ listeners heard them that way. But Jesus stood in a long tradition of prophets who criticized the government. The prophet Isaiah spoke for God when he said, *Here’s the kind of spiritual practice I want from you: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts.* There’s no action that could feel much more political than that.

It’s from the many parts of the Bible like this that there has come a long history of the Church working for justice. The end of slavery, the civil rights movement, the end of apartheid in South Africa. The Bible is where our United Methodist Social Principles take their authority from when they say, “The church should continually exert a strong ethical influence upon the state. The *Church* should support policies and programs that are just and oppose policies and programs that are unjust.” (Paragraph 164 (B))

Welcoming immigrants, changing the systems that exploit and oppress people, making sure every person is treated with dignity and equity, making peace. Those are holy purposes, every bit as much God's concern as they are a political agenda. *More* a moral agenda than a political one. We think of those issues as politics because we've tried to accomplish those goals by political action, through government. But our method of putting those values into place—making them the work of elected officials—does not take them out of the concern of God, or out of our responsibility as God's people.

The beginning of every new administration in Washington is a good time to remind ourselves that our responsibility for this work continues long after we've finished voting. Maybe it's particularly important now, when many people are skeptical about the values of a President who has drawn clear lines around who will be included in the benefits of being an American and who will not. But at *every* moment this is the truth: We cannot assign out the work of loving our neighbor. No government—certainly no President of the United States—can hold for us the conviction of our faith: that the love and generosity that we have known has to be shared.

Let me say this as clearly as I can. No matter who is President, the work of compassion remains the same. It's about making our communities safe for everyone, resolving conflict without violence, practicing forgiveness, welcoming the stranger, sharing our resources, caring for one another no matter who we are, where we come from, what gender we are or what our ability is. No matter who is President, no matter what the government does, this is *our* work. The Church's work. Campbell United Methodist Church's work.

If you are discouraged about what you can expect from Washington in the next four years, then don't expect the federal government to do the work that has been ours all along. The great "No" that was spoken yesterday in demonstrations around the world must now be translated into a powerful "Yes." No government has threatened the power given to us by God, to *be* a people of compassion, a community where everyone is welcomed and cared for. That work is local and personal, not national. It happens right here. The only thing that will keep us from making this place look like a little corner of the God's kingdom is our own inertia, our failure to answer the call to do what God needs from us in this time.

When I was in Cuba last year, the most remarkable thing I saw was a Church that had learned resourcefulness under a government that had tried to limit its mission. When the Castro government was installed in 1959, churches were all but closed. Their social programs—schools, food distribution sites, child care centers—were shut down. All the property they owned for anything other than worship was confiscated; sanctuaries were permitted be used for worship only. They were prohibited from building any new churches, and from congregating in public places. The churches hunkered down for a while. They shrank in members; people were afraid. In 1985, no one had been ordained in the Cuban Methodist Church for more than ten years.

But the spark in those churches had not died. They began to come alive again. Under a regime far more oppressive and controlling than we will ever know in this country, they figured out what to do. They started new churches—not in new church buildings, but in living rooms, small groups of people who gather together to pray and sing, tell the stories that give them hope,

support one another. They've been creative: every morning church sanctuaries host prayer and fasting services. Every poor person who can't afford to eat breakfast is welcome to come and pray, and then *break the fast* with a meal at lunchtime. On New Year's Eve, the churches were packed. I asked, "Why would young people choose to spend New Year's Eve at church?" The answer: "This is their statement. Being part of a church—worshiping God—is the most subversive, countercultural thing people can do."

Do you really think that the love of God, the good intentions of God for this creation that he has poured himself into, can be defeated by *any* government? We—not the government—*we*—are the ones who carry God's intentions. And there is always a way for love to rise up and break through.

After the Brexit vote this last summer, a small movement began. People began to pin safety pins to the outside of their shirts. The idea was that wearing a pin would show that you were a 'safe person' at a time and in a place when hatred and suspicion of 'outsiders' was also common. That movement came and went pretty quickly, as such things usually do. But I read a story the other day of a nine year old boy named Charles who put one of those safety pins on his shirt. He wanted other kids on the playground to know that if they were being teased or bullied, he was a safe kid to run to. He told his mom that his pin reminded him, every day, that if he saw anyone being teased or bullied, he should step in and stand next to them.

After Charles had worn the pin for a few weeks he began to worry that the other kids would get so used to seeing that safety pin on him, that they wouldn't even see it. Maybe he'd even forget it was there. So he began attaching *two* safety pins to his shirt every morning. He even put them on his pajamas at night. The pin holes began to stretch and warp the fabric of his clothes. But no matter. What mattered to that little boy was the steadfastness of his commitment to be a person who will step up for other people, move toward hateful situations, be a light in dark places.¹

That work will look slightly different for each of us. Here's another picture. Prabhjot Singh is a Sikh man, a physician who lives in New York City. In 2013, he was attacked by a gang in the neighborhood where he lived. They called him a terrorist. They broke his jaw. This was the third time he'd been physically assaulted since 9/11. After this attack Dr. Singh was so angry. It was outrageous, that this could happen to him not just once but over and over again, in *this* country. The attack had broken not only his body but his spirit. And so he turned inward, to address the wound inside of him. He searched both his Sikh scriptures and the Bible; he meditated on the same message he found in both. Gradually, his outrage turned into gratitude. Gratitude that his wife and son were not with him when he was attacked, that bystanders had intervened, that there seemed to be a way for him not to be imprisoned by hate.

Gratitude became Dr. Singh's personal message. He began to say it out loud, and then to speak about it everywhere. And everywhere he found support and encouragement. He got prayer cards from a church in Mississippi, letters from a Hindu temple in Los Angeles. But the most powerful response came from his neighbors. Grandmothers in his neighborhood stepped into the

¹ From *What a 9 year old boy would like to teach you today...* at brianmclaren.net

street to hug him; shopkeepers shared their sympathies. Patients in the hospital asked him how *he* was feeling. His family began to feel safer in their neighborhood than they ever had before. His own compassion had become an invitation to others to act compassionately. He changed things—not by attacking back against hatred, not by instructing others how to think. By connection.²

Our lives— our personal experiences, our professional skills, the nurturing of our spirits—have been making us ready, polishing us, for just such a moment as this. For the work in front of us, the work of *being* the people of God. For the project of building in this community a house of compassion and justice. Nothing is stopping us. This is the moment for us to get serious, to commit ourselves not just to a day of protest, but to the long, slow, practical, persistent work ahead. That work doesn't require a president or governor or legislature to lead it. It requires our commitment to stay with it until it is done.

Today is the day God calls *us* to be renewed in the image of our Creator—in care for creation; in hating violence; in seeing and taking in people who are starving or seeking a home; in demanding that rich and poor alike have what they need. Today is the day God brings good news to the poor and announces to everyone who has never yet gotten a fair break that God stands with them.

And the people said, **And so shall we.**

² *One Sikh's Vision to Create MLK's Beloved Community*, at auburnseminary.org