



## WHAT COMES NEXT?

November 13, 2016, The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 146:3-10; I Timothy 2:1-4

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Theme: A word must be spoken after a deeply divisive election.

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*Gracious God, give us the courage to hear your word at this divisive intersection in our nation's history. May we welcome it when it comforts us. May we welcome it when it confronts us. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

Last Tuesday evening my wife and I were driving back to New York from a visit with my mother in Maryland. It's usually a four or five hour run and it was going well... till the end. Election eve traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike was lighter than usual. It was OK until we passed the Vince Lombardi Service Plaza, six or seven miles from the George Washington Bridge. It was about ten o'clock, and all of the sudden highway hell erupted. Still sparse traffic, but the 18-wheelers were just flying by me... and I was driving the speed limit plus. Cars were barreling along, weaving across lanes to find a slot to pass everybody else. It was crazy; maybe it's always like that when traffic is light, but it was scary. To make it even worse, my cell phone was vibrating constantly. I was in a texting group with my wife and our three kids, and election eve texts were flying as fast as the trucks. I don't know if drivers were charged up by the emerging elections results or if they just wanted to get home and turn on CNN. What I know is that part of me wanted to pull off I-95 and sit it out in a rest stop. But if you know that stretch of road, there are no rest stops, no place to get off.

Well, five days later and part of me wishes I could get off *this* road, the road that leads into the pulpit to speak a word following this bruising and extraordinarily divisive presidential election. I've never seen the emotional temperature so high



after an election. In all my career as a minister, I don't remember a week when so many people offered me suggestions about what I ought to say come Sunday. But there's no place to get off the road into the pulpit, no exits for the preacher.

I'll begin with the obvious. First, the nation is indeed deeply divided. I've never preached a sermon like this the Sunday after an election, but I feel called to do so today because never before in my ministry have I witnessed such polarization. Churches, families, friendship have been stressed to the breaking point. Some of you rejoiced Wednesday morning; some of your hearts were heavy with sorrow and fear. Some of you see blue skies ahead; some see nothing but gloom.

But, secondly, the Republic *is* strong and will survive this sea change. It would have survived had the other candidate won. And it will survive this winner. Our institutions – stressed and assailed as they may be – have weathered greater discord in the past. Note the peaceful transition; note the civility of the words spoken in victory and concession speeches, as well as those of our current President.

In the Broadway hit *Hamilton*, author Lin-Manuel Miranda has old King George sing these lines after it becomes apparent that the colonies have won the day: “*I’ve got a small query for you: What comes next?*” And later in the same song: “*Do you have a clue what happens now?*” I’ve thought long and prayed hard about what clues I might offer in this sermon, clues about how we might navigate “what comes next.”

The first clue is this: as seldom before, we are presently called to be exceptionally deliberate and deeply thoughtful about how we *speak* to and about each other, and how we *listen* to each other.

First, our speech. The talk that animated the campaign was consistently militaristic and demonizing. It was militaristic in that it was always about “battles,” and “fighting,” and “defeating.” It was, in fact, the rhetoric of war. It was also the simplistic, dangerous and demonizing rhetoric of “us and them,” “the children of light” verses “the children of darkness.” We simply must find a better way to



speak to and about each other, a rhetoric that eschews the vocabularies of war and demonization.

In a thoughtful essay in Friday's *New York Times*, columnist David Brooks wrote about the risks of "*turning politics into a Manichean civil war between the alleged children of light and the alleged children of darkness – between the enlightened, college-educated tolerant people and the supposed primitive hoard driven by dark fears and prejudices. That crude and ignorant condescension,*" Brooks writes, "*is what feeds the Trump phenomenon in the first place.*"

And just as we must speak thoughtfully, we have to *listen* thoughtfully to each other – listen long, hard and patiently, even when listening makes us uncomfortable. Let me offer two example of uncomfortably hard listening.

First, those of us who voted for Clinton need to listen to the red-state world that voted overwhelmingly for Trump. The lake cottage where Terri and I have been spending summers for 40 years is located in Mason County, Michigan. Mason County voted almost as overwhelmingly for Trump as New York County voted for Clinton. Mason County is largely white, though there's a growing Hispanic population, mostly Mexican field workers who've chosen to "settle out," as they say. They've been welcomed, by the way, more than accepted, *welcomed*. The county is generally middle class or poor, both Anglos and Hispanics. I have gotten to know a lot of my year-around neighbors over the years, neighbors I know mostly voted Republican last Tuesday. In general, they simply are *not* racists *or* bigots *or* misogynists. They're mostly really good folks. But, here's the point: they *do* feel that they have been passed by; they *do* feel they've not been heard. They sense that their concerns have not been addressed by the East and West Coast elites. They believe that New York, Washington, Hollywood and Silicon Valley run the country, and that those far-away bubbles look down on them and discount their values. Mason County has mostly missed out on the economic recovery that you and I have enjoyed. Jobs there often pay *less* – sometimes lots less – than they used to. Unemployment runs high; young people leave for Grand Rapids or Chicago; there's rising opioid, alcohol and meth addiction.



Again, David Brooks on this sense that the elites don't hear: *"Populism... has always been a warning sign, a warning sign that there is some deeper dysfunction in our economic, social, and cultural systems. If you want to take that warning sign and dismiss it as simple bigotry, you are never going to pause to understand what's going on and you will never know how to constructively respond."*

A second example of hard listening. Those of us who voted for Trump need to listen to those who feel deeply afraid and marginalized by his rhetoric, by the election result, and by the mean spirit both have aroused around the country. Examples: *"Near San Francisco a home in the Noe Valley flew a Nazi flag where kids walk to school. A white middle school student brought a Trump sign to school and told a black classmate it was time for him to get 'back in place.' A gay New York City man getting on a bus was told that he should 'enjoy the concentration camp...' A group of Hispanic kids in Raleigh were taunted by white children telling them they were 'going back to Mexico.'"*<sup>1</sup>

The Christian faith has always called us to stand *with* and to stand *for* the marginalized, the victimized and the oppressed. It's what Jesus did and it's what he calls us to do.

The way of speaking and listening that I'm aching for may perhaps be summed up as simple kindness, a kindness that dares to speak lovingly; a kindness that struggles to listen hard.

The second and third clues as to "what comes next" are found in today's Bible readings. The first of the two Scripture readings that Katie read is the better part of the 146<sup>th</sup> Psalm. It is a poem of resounding praise to the transcendent God. It began, *"Do not put your trust in princes."* The Psalmist bluntly reminds us that leaders are *"mortals, in whom there is no help"* and that *"their plans will perish."* The truth – true then and true now – is that princes cannot save us. Donald Trump cannot save us. Hillary Clinton could not have saved us had she been elected. Only God saves. Oh, princes and presidents matter, matter a lot. But they cannot save us. Only a deep and abiding trust in God can save us. And this is the God who, the Psalmist goes on to say, *"sets the prisoner free"* and *"opens the eyes of*



*the blind*” and *“lifts up those who are bowed down”* and *“watches over the strangers”* and *“upholds the orphan and the widow.”* We did not elect God last Tuesday; we elected a mere President, and Presidents – good ones and bad ones – come and go.

A third and last clue. The New Testament passage Katie read is from the First Letter to Timothy, who was a younger colleague of Paul. This short letter addresses both Timothy and his church. The verses we heard counsel him to ensure that *“supplications, prayers and intercessions be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions...”*

Now, this was probably *not* an injunction welcomed by everybody in that ancient church. *“Kings”* meant the Roman emperor. So the church is actually being asked to pray for one of a string of generally nasty and venal characters who sat on the imperial throne in the First Century. The counsel of Scripture is to pray for *everyone*, whether you voted for them or not, whether you respect them or despise them.

I came across a photograph on the internet the week before last that showed a sign on the front lawn of a church somewhere. The sign was a large mock ballot and had four lines with a box to the left of each line to check with your vote. The first three lines read “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Independent.” The fourth line read “Pray.” That last box was checked.

This past Wednesday evening a couple dozen Brick members gathered for a “Prayer Service for Reconciliation.” Scripture was read and we prayed for healing in the wake of this exceptionally divisive election. I ended the service with a prayer that I’d like to ask you to join me in. Our country needs prayer. Our leaders need prayer. Our President-elect surely needs prayer.

Let us pray: “Eternal and All-vulnerable God, we thank you for the gift of democracy that we enjoy in the United States and for the privilege of voting in yesterday’s elections. We are a congregation with differing political views. Please help us to love one another and find fresh way to love you, our neighbors, (and our



enemies) in the days ahead. This feels like a decisive moment for our county, but there is so much fear and division. We pray for your guidance and truth. We trust you. We pray for reconciliation. We pray for all our leaders who have been elected at local, state, and national levels. We pray for President-elect Trump, that he and they may lead us in the ways of justice, freedom, and peace.

*In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> From an essay by the Rev. John Pavlovitz in his November 10, 2016 blog.