

Pentecost XV - Followers of Jesus in a Political Season
Jeremiah 31:31-35 and Luke 18:1-8
October 11, 2020
Rev. Dr. Amy P. McCullough

One of my favorite sermons, offered by Rowan Williams, Anglican priest and former Archbishop, asks the question “Is there a Christian sexual ethic?” Is there a particular Christian way that we might tackle this universal dimension of being human?

I’ve been thinking about his question in light of another inescapable fact of human life: politics. Last week contained an avalanche of news related to the political dimension of life - presidential debates, taxes, President Trump being diagnosed with COVID-19 – and navigating the news, as a human being and pastor, led me down a similar inquiry. What might our faith offer as we confront our common life and our shared future?

Now before I go any further let me clear about what I am not saying. Many of us claim the church should not be involved in politics. It is absolutely true is that a sermon should not endorse a candidate or tell a congregation you should support a particular platform or position. You are thoughtful, resourceful members of Christ’s body and citizens in society, who can and do discern such things for yourself.

Instead, each week we attempt a collective, humble listening to scriptures, mine the church’s teachings through the centuries, and reflect upon their inevitable claims about the issues that affect common life. The word political is derived from the Greek word polis, which means city-state. Within the term’s use in the ancient world arose an understanding that it is difficult to separate out the government that forms society and the affairs of the society itself. The laws by which we live have social implications. Jesus had much to say about how life can flourish, how power is used, and who is or isn’t given voice. Within our tradition, the Methodist Church across history has spoken publicly about voting, gambling, and racism. The church has labored in education and to improve global health. The deliberative process about what to say or do is often messy. We, at times, disagree mightily. We don’t always live up to our ideals. But I think it is safe to say that our commitment to Jesus should offer direction in how we understand and live out our common life in the larger world.

Furthermore, I think it is safe to say that all of us are concerned about where our country finds itself in October of 2020. We are grieving – grieving those who have died, grieving the loss of normal routines, and our capacity to congregate for anything from Ravens game to Sunday sanctuary worship. We have been stripped of a sense of safety. I, for one, have moments of deep weariness – weary of how different things feel, of being relatively isolated, living amid animosity or distrust and not knowing how to restore the goodwill and unity that I know and experience in you.

Christians, says Williams, follow a man who came as a sign of God, whose entire life pointed to God's love, faithfulness, and new possibility in our world.¹ A man who said, you, too, can be a sign of God. Your life can speak of faithfulness, mercy, courage, and newness. This, I believe, is the place to start as we think about how we live our faith within our nation's life; how we might be signs of God in the world. Each of our scriptures offers additional clues.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke to a community in exile, whose cities are rubble, whose lives are turned upside down, and who have lost their worshiping home. There is bitterness in the water, tears that do not stop, and a sense of hopelessness about the future. The tasks of a prophet are part truth-telling and part hope-giving. The truth-telling portion of Jeremiah's message says to the exiles: Your actions have played a role in your homeland's destruction. That is not an easy message to deliver or hear but it is a necessary one. Can you look inward, backward, or talk across the fence with your neighbor about where things have gone wrong?

The body of Christ, secure in God's love and confident of God's faithfulness, also can ask such questions. What role have I or we played in the decline in civility, the perpetuation of racist structures, or lack of care for the earth? Was I a by-stander, someone who in ignorance maintained the status quo? Have I lost a link to the neighbor Jesus commands me to love? Can we probe our obsession with the internet or the lack of a shared, agreed-upon reality? Jeremiah ushers us into a confessional place, one that is neither easy nor comfortable and whose end is not pre-determined, but always grounded in God's love for us all.

Jeremiah is also a hope-giver. The hope comes in the language of a "covenant written upon our hearts." Jeremiah imagines God placing a relational link deep within us, a covenant. God relational bond with us is not contractual - if you do this, then I'll do that - but by bonding with us with fidelity, forgiveness, and grace-filled future. By forming a covenant with us, God enables us to be covenantal people in the world, people who live by fidelity, forgiveness, and grace. Think about the covenants in your life. Think about the parents, children, spouses, and friends with whom you have formed lifelong, mutual relationship. In a covenant, your ego grows smaller, your understanding grows deeper, and your hearts grows larger. When a conflict happens and you worry you have reached a dead end. Then someone says "I'm sorry" or you together find a way to laugh and you see each other anew. In covenantal life, we recognize we are bound to one another, these communities are inseparable from who we are, and we find our way forward. People of Christ, we are witnesses to this relational way of living.

So look around in truth. Live covenantally. What happens if this is not enough? Jesus' disciples, long after Israel's exile had ended, are still waiting for the fullness of God's reign. So Jesus tells them a parable about a judge and widow, which he says is to help you not lose heart.

There was once a judge, a nameless, faceless judge who was neither fearful of God nor respectful of people. As Walter Brueggemann imagines, he got his position by cunning or

¹ Williams, Rowan, "Is There a Christian Sexual Ethic?" in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995), 140.

calculation, and kept it for the status, security, or the pay check.² Despite his lack of interest in settling disputes or promoting shalom, he had a seat on the bench and was the authority to which the widow had to appeal.

The widow is a woman without status, without household, without wealth. She is, Brueggemann's words, a nonperson. She comes before the judge in her carefully pressed but faded suit, her hair styled in a manner reflecting a previous generation, with a bundle of papers because she is representing herself, and speaks in rough voice to present her case. She has no authority, but she does have a dispute. The text calls it an unjust matter that needs restitution.

She appeals to the judge. He says No. She returns the next day, asks again for justice. No is the verdict from the bench. No doubt, continues Brueggemann, the judge thought he had seen the last of her. But she kept coming back. Day after day. Brueggemann imagines her as someone who keeps nagging, saying "She must have been discouraged, discouraged enough to quit. She had nowhere else to go. And she is convinced she is right."³ Finally weary of her constant nagging, the judge gives into her request. If even an unjust judge will eventually grant justice, Jesus concludes, how much more so will God provide the justice the world so deeply needs.

What is this story about? It addresses persistence, telling us to keep at it even when the word from on high is no. It addresses justice. In scripture, justice is described as food for the hungry, place to lay one's head for the homeless, dignity for the nonperson, universal status as children of God. It is called a parable about prayer, persistently praying for justice to God, the good, faithful judge.

Brueggemann concludes, "At the bottom of hope and justice and nagging is faith. Faith that this is God's world, that God will listen, faith that the world will be changed."⁴ What does the Christian have to offer to our national political life. There are more answers to that question than there is time in this sermon, but I would suggest this: confessional truth-telling, a vision of fidelity and forgiveness bound in our inescapable relationships with one another, and a persistence nagging for justice, grounded in prayer, built upon faith. You and I follow Jesus, God's fleshly life in our fallen, complicated, hurting world and in our following Jesus, we become signposts to God. May it be so. Amen.

² Brueggemann, Walter, "When Nagging Is Hoping" in *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 95-99.

³ Ibid, 96.

⁴ Ibid, 98.