

Post-Election Apocalypse: What Do We Do Now?

It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work.

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The Rev. Devon Anderson

It was 9:32 pm on Tuesday night when the scales fell from my eyes, and I realized that Donald Trump was likely the next President of the United States. And I began to panic. The panic did not stem necessarily from the fact that my personal platforms and policies that I support in my personal life would not be realized. And, strangely, it wasn't entirely about the safety of my family and loved ones. Curiously, *my panic was about my relationship with you*. And so, I did what every self-respecting, panicking priest should do: I called the bishop. And let me say, it's a very kind bishop who responds to a 9-1-1 call at 11:00 pm.

"Whichever way this election goes," I told him, "I am completely at a loss for how to minister to my congregation. Trinity is a loving community made up of the fullest expression of political ideology. Whatever happens, we will not be of one mind. Trinity could splinter along political divides -- or -- we come together like never before. The problem," I told him, "is that I have no idea how to help prevent the first, or foster the second."

Though our bishop was jetting off Wednesday for a conference, I received permission to call Metro clergy together to share our feelings, pray, and discuss how to minister to our people. It was so comforting to walk into a room filled with my personal heroes of the faith. And yet - as great as they are - they did not offer the silver-bullet idea for how to lead and fix that I thought I so desperately needed. But they offered something far better. Our gathering settled and soothed. It reconnected me to the Spirit of God, to the foundations and promises of our faith, to the rock-solid power of Christian community. This re-connectedness abated my panic and I drove home with some semblance of openness. It was into that receptive place that what I truly needed was given:

It may be, spoke the poem by Wendell Berry, that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work; and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

In two weeks, on the first Sunday of Advent, I will mark five years at Trinity as your Rector. And it may very well be that, after all this time, we will finally arrive at the place where our real work begins and we start our real journey together. As a nation, we stand at a crossroads and the right path forward is frightfully unclear. In the wake of Tuesday's election, many paths have presented themselves – some good, some not. Some paths are divisive, some unifying. Some paths are sinister, some healing. Some paths are about talking, and others, listening. Which path will Trinity choose? Who do we want to be in response to the toxic political climate, the deep, ominous divisions, in response to the fates and furies swirling around us?

While I know not which path we should choose, while I cannot offer you a silver bullet that will fix one single thing -- I can offer you something better. In his column Friday morning, David Brooks wrote: *outrage and disgust impede learning. This century is still being formed and none of us understand it yet.* It may just be that the learning we will glean from the election and the campaign season leading up to it will be our reward, of sorts, for having endured it. It just might be that the path of learning and listening, and then allowing our learning to shape us and direct our actions, is a viable path for us.

Speaking from my own heart, in these first raw days after the election, perhaps my greatest learning is how truly and seemingly irrevocably we are divided as a country. I have never before so fully felt the extent and the depth of the chasm between us as Americans across every possible line: gender, culture, race, economics, class, geography, generation, and sexuality. I have not fully understood the intensity of the schisms within Christianity itself – and how the Gospels we share can be used to validate such polemically different visions for our common life. And, hearing from so many of you this week, I have learned how the divisions that plague our country are playing out within families – brothers, sisters, parents, children, cousins – people we love so dearly but whose perspective and values worry our hearts and drive us apart. Our divisions are present and laying us bare even in the most intimate relationships of our lives.

I find it ironic that the one common sentiment we can all seem to get around is how bitterly divided we are. I don't exactly understand how we have arrived to this moment, but maybe it is because along the way we have lost the capacity to communicate and relate across difference. In his book, "Healing the Heart of Democracy," Parker Palmer writes, "If I were asked for two words to summarize the habits American citizens need in response to 21st century conditions, *chutzpah* and *humility* are the words I would choose. By *chutzpah* I mean knowing that I have a voice that needs to be heard and the right to speak it. By *humility* I mean accepting the fact that my truth is always partial and may not be true at all – so I need to listen with openness and respect, especially to 'the other,' as much as I need to speak my own voice with clarity and conviction. *Humility* plus *chutzpah* equals the kind of citizens a democracy needs."

Parker puts forth five interlocking "habits of the heart," which he believes that, taken together, are crucial to sustaining a democracy. These habits include understanding that we are profoundly interconnected and dependent upon one another, developing an appreciation of the value of 'otherness,' cultivating the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways, generating a sense of personal voice and agency, and strengthening our capacity to create community. Obviously, Palmer's ideas deserve much deeper explanation and exploration. Though I cannot do them justice this morning, I raise them because they signal a path out of our current despair and division. They are concrete and doable. They find their foundations in Christian imperatives. There are Trinity parishioners, specifically Joyce McFarland and through her, Chris Commers, Ben Bache-Wiig, and Rob Johnson, who have studied and engaged these paths in their own ministries of reconciliation in the world. And, Trinity has had some success using these practices. Many of you will remember three years ago when the Vestry called us into a parish-wide discussion about gay marriage. Together we studied and then deployed the art of civil discourse. We may not have all agreed or come from the same place, but our discussion was respectful and we learned to listened to each other with our whole hearts. We were stronger as a community than we were before – not because we were of one mind, but because we had an experience of coming together as brothers and sisters in Christ that transcended those differences. Our bonds of affection were and are stronger than the temptation to divide. Maybe going forward, we look upon this church community as an incubator for experimenting with the practices of listening, reconciliation, and unity so we can exercise those art forms out in the world as agents of change and healing. For I believe, fundamentally, in the power of

person to person, human to human, heart to heart transformation. And we are capable of that work here at Trinity.

With a collective future that now feels more unsteady and uncertain than ever before, another learning is that we need church and Christian community more than ever. We are disciples of Jesus. We worship a God who is all things, who gives all things, a God that is both mysterious and compassionate. We are people of the Gospel and we try to pattern our lives in the ways Jesus taught us. It is in Christian community, over and again, that we are called to be *in* this world but not *of it* – that we are called to pledge our allegiance to God’s law, God’s vision for us – a vision that transcends any earthly law, that is more expansive than any policy or platform or party. *We need church and Christian community more than ever to: school us in God’s vision, to call us to action in God’s service, and to bind us together with God’s love.* It is precisely in these moments when we are the most unhinged and conflicted, the most confused and emotional that we need the kind of grounding, security, and direction only God in Christian community can provide.

We look no further than this morning’s Gospel for our cue. In it, Jesus gives directions to his disciples concerning what they ought to do in times of chaos and destruction. And Jesus paints quite an impressive portrait of misery! The end times are in the future, Jesus tells his friends, and they won’t happen all at once. But – in the midst of it all -- chaos and destruction “will give you an opportunity to testify.” What a prophetic call! Suffering as an opportunity to testify. “Suffering,” writes theologian Shawn Copeland, “always means pain, disruption, separation, and incompleteness. It can render us powerless and mute, push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair.” But the opportunity to testify during an apocalypse is in part the audacity to muster courage in the face of fear, the boldness to speak in the face of suffering. Jesus tells us that suffering provides an opportunity for those who have learned something in its wake or have been changed in its experience to proclaim that healing, to testify to hope. Suffering changes us. Pain changes us. And we do well not to tamp it down or push it away. Because if we do, we miss all transformation it offers us. It’s through our pain and suffering that we are changed and strengthened. It’s through pain and suffering that we learn about kindness, that we earn wisdom and develop resilience. And it’s our job, as Christians, to witness to that learned kindness, that earned wisdom, that developed resilience. What do we do in hard times? We profess. We proclaim. We raise up

to the community – in every way we can -- God’s hopeful vision for our future. We hold the line. We do not move to Canada. We do not give up.

We have also learned that it is also only in Christian community where we are schooled in the hard work of justice. Moses, Miriam, the prophets of Israel, Jesus – all of our spiritual forbearers called the people of faith to justice and equality – not just for ourselves but – more importantly - for other people. There is no doubt that this campaign season unleashed something evil and mean into the air. And there are many people – women, ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, gay and transgendered people – who are terrified that campaign promises to impinge upon their human and civil rights will become reality. And there is no domesticating, no way of getting around, the Gospel imperative for justice for all. It will be our duty in the coming years to find ways to locate ourselves in between our neighbors and any effort to strip back their dignity and rights. Trinity has a 27-year history of refugee relocation ministry. Twenty-seven years. And it’s because the founders of this ministry knew that their freedom is tied up with freedom for other people. Our own salvation is interconnected with that of the ‘other,’ the stranger. We’ve also seen real investment in our Forum series on Islam, because we know that understanding is the first step toward justice.

And finally, this: we need church and Christian community more than ever because within it we can practice the kind of peace and unity we so desire for our country. The civil rights leader John Lewis tells a simple story a group of young children, a wood-frame house and a windstorm. *It was a Saturday, Lewis reflects, and about 15 of us children were outside my Aunt Senena’s house, playing in her dirt yard when the sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance....I was terrified because I had already seen what lightning could do: I’d seen fields catch on fire after a hit to a haystack, I’d watched trees actually explode when a bolt of lightning struck them. Us kids ran inside as the wind began to howl and the house started to shake. We were scared, and then it got worse. Then the house was beginning to sway and the wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then a corner of the room started lifting up. The storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it. That was when Aunt Senena told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house*

began to lift. And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

And so, this morning, in this moment, we come together to sing, to affirm our faith, to share the bread and the wine, to pray as our way of linking our arms together and holding our trembling world down with the weight of our faith and our love for one another. *It may be that when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work.* Through our endurance we will gain our souls.

Let us begin. AMEN.

Sources:

Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit, by Parker J. Palmer, pp. 43-46.

Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective, by M. Shawn Copeland, p. 109.

Disciplines of the Spirit, Howard Thurman, p. 76.

Walking with the Wind, by John Lewis, prologue.