



A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Hirschfeld

February 2, 2017

Several clergy have shared with me a modest but noticeable increase in attendance at our churches since last November's election. If social commentators are correct, it may be that the painful and stark divisions within our culture are invitations for souls to seek community, connection, mutual support and healing in our parish churches. As it happens, I am writing this in a monastery where the guesthouse is full to capacity and includes persons of different generations (including young adults!), races, and genders. Some of the monks have wondered if places like this will become more and more a refuge from a society pulling apart at the seams. If so, monastic life will be brought to its original function in society, as we remember that the Saints Benedict and Scholastica founded their orders partly in response to the chaos that ensued during the fall of the Roman Empire.

Here at the monastery, the sermons are not very explicit about the President or the latest Executive Order or tweet. They focus on the Lord Jesus and the beautiful realm that he points us to, the realm we refer to as the Kingdom of God. How Jesus treated people--sinners, seekers, the ill, the powerless--these are the topics for reflection, homilies, prayer, discussion, and contemplation around the Altar of communion. To gather in a community of prayer, kindness, mutual respect, humility, and hospitality towards the stranger is itself an act of political resistance to a culture that is increasingly coarse, hateful, racist, and intolerant of differing political views.

I believe in a Jesus who chose the way of humility, personal sacrifice, kindness, love of community among strangers. In the Gospel lesson from Matthew 5 that we just read on a recent Sunday, we heard how Jesus privileged not the wealthy, but the poor, not the bullying, but the meek, not the belligerent, but the peacemakers, not the self-assured, but the broken-hearted. These are ones on whom God's favor rests.

The Jesus who preached the Sermon the Mount is the Jesus we all need to hear more about these days. The Jesus who referred to a thin-skinned King Herod as a fox, and who was annoyingly silent before an anxious governor Pilate, and who was willing to lose his life to show how puny worldly power is on Easter morning--that's the Jesus I need to hear more about. That's the Jesus whom I need to listen for more frequently in my life. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was always first. First. Even before Caesar.

As prevalent as the talk about our President is, it's even more critical for us in the Church to be talking about Jesus right now. Who was he? What does it mean when we say that Jesus is Lord, Sovereign, The Christ? When those in political power claim to make decisions based on their Christian commitments, who is the Christ they are claiming to follow and obey? What is the nature of the power that Christ gives to us? How did Jesus exercise power and authority? The Christ I have followed, and who led me into this Church, is the Christ who chose to empty himself by joining the fallen human race. He did this in order to show how, on that first Easter, love conquers all fear, all death, and shines in every darkness.

As much as each of us is being called to demonstrate and act on our political views in the public sphere of our lives--and we are so called--I believe God is asking something even more risky, more dangerous, more uncomfortable of us when we gather in prayer: to extend the peace of Christ to those with whom we find ourselves on the other side, politically. I agree with those observers who have said that at least part of the reason our nation is in its present predicament is because we've lost the ability to take seriously the pain, the full story, of our estranged neighbors. I think Jesus did that--listened to his neighbors, even neighbors and disciples who often irked him. For proof of his being irked, just check out how those first followers fare with Jesus in Mark's Gospel.

On my wall is a framed quotation that was given to each bishop who was ordained during Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori's time as our Presiding Bishop. The quote is from Archbishop Helder Camara, who served as a bishop in Brazil during a prolonged and oppressive military regime in that economically fractured country. Dom Helder, as a young priest, adhered to some very right-wing political views, and over time his experience among the poor led him to a ministry in solidarity with the disenfranchised, for whom he became an outspoken advocate. All the while, with God's help, he maintained relationships with those who took exception to his witness. The quote on my wall reads:

Let no one be scandalized if I frequent those who are considered unworthy or sinful. Who is not a sinner? Let no one be alarmed if I am seen with compromised and dangerous people, on the left or the right. Let no one bind me to a group. My door, my heart, must be open to everyone, absolutely everyone.

May God give us such a capacity for love and openness in these times so marked by shame, division, and scandal, remembering how Jesus stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, so that everyone might come within His saving embrace. (*Book of Common Prayer, page 101*).

O God, help us.

Yours Faithfully, in the Lord Jesus,

+Rob

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