

Love Trumps Fear

Readings: 'Poem on the Occasion of the Midterm Election' by Matthew Rohrer
'For You, O Democracy' by Walt Whitman
from *Healing the Heart of Democracy* by Parker J. Palmer

It has been a strange election season. Months ago, who would have thought that a self-proclaimed socialist would be a serious contender to be the Democratic Party presidential nominee? Who would have thought that the Republican contest would have played out as it has – governors and senators dropping out the race as they failed to build momentum. The current leader in delegates is Donald Trump, businessman and reality show host.

His candidacy and the aspects of our culture that it has brought to wider attention has baffled, bewildered, and sometimes terrified me. I know that I am not alone in this – I hear it in our conversations and see it in your facebook feed. I see the movement he represents causing fear and sometimes heartbreak... and I need to speak to it.

Now there are rules about churches and electoral politics. There are certain IRS rules I—and we as a church as a whole—need to follow to maintain our tax-exempt status. Now, the church is relatively free to engage and advocacy and lobbying on issues that we care about – and we do that. There are wonderful social justice ministries here that sometimes work to convince elected leaders and others who hold power to change policy and programs. That is well within our rights as a non-profit 501c3 organization, our category for tax purposes.

It is much more complicated when it comes to electoral politics. We cannot do anything that implies endorsement of a particular candidate by our congregation. That would include putting up yard signs on our property, distributing campaign literature, making announcements for the benefit of specific politicians, officially endorsing someone through a congregational vote, or me telling you who to vote for in my role as your minister. As a church, we cannot financially support a candidate or a political action committee. In our business activity, we must be impartial. It's complicated – and there are benefits and drawbacks to this, but it is the reality we live with.

This is not to say that we as individual church members can't have conversations about who we're voting for over coffee or at other times, we just need to make sure that it is clear that we are expressing our opinions, not the opinion of the church as a whole – and most of the time, that's pretty obvious.

So, even with all those restrictions, this is a topic I want to engage with you this morning.

Last November, a study was published in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. It showed that since 1998, the life expectancy for white people between ages 45 and 54 in our country has been falling, that the mortality rate has been increasing by half a percent a year. This rise in mortality was not happening in other countries or in other racial and ethnic groups in our country. The co-author of the study, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, said that this meant that 2 million extra people have died since 1998.

As the authors drilled into the data, they were surprised by the causes of these "extra" deaths. The increasing mortality rate was most common among white people with a high school education or less. The deaths were suicides, alcohol- and drug-related deaths, and deaths from alcohol-related liver diseases.

Many called them deaths of despair. Perhaps you've heard about this study or witnessed this reality. Perhaps you've know that the abuse of opiates is reaching unprecedented levels in white communities, that 90% of the people who try heroin now are white, that they often come to it because it is cheaper than the prescription pain killers that they've become dependent on. Perhaps you or someone you love is living this story.

The authors speculate that financial strain is why these less-educated white people are dying of despair, that our economy has shifted. Because of trade policy and technological advances, the good jobs that would allow them to provide for families, live comfortably, or save for retirement have evaporated. They are not living the American Dream they were promised. They are despairing.¹

Financial strain can't be the whole story – otherwise we would see this same despair in other ethnic groups. I think this also has to do with race. White people who exist in this culture imbued with white supremacy live with internalized racial superiority. People socialized as white have been taught that they are better than people of color in subtle and not-so-subtle ways their entire life. We cannot escape it. It is in me, mostly unconsciously, but it is there, poisoning people and poisoning relationships. This internalized racial superiority must contribute to the deaths of despair. It is a poison that we all carry.

And as our world shifts, sometimes that internalized racial superiority poisons us. I can imagine that, if a white person is despairing over the broken promise of the American Dream – and sees a black president and other successes by people of color, it might churn up that internalized racial superiority. "If they can succeed, why can't I? I have been taught since birth that I am better than they are... and here they are better than me." And the poison is activated and perhaps the next step is depression, perhaps a way this whole group of people manages that despair is drugs and alcohol and self-harm. Again, I don't know this for certain, the study didn't investigate this, but the realities of race and racism must be part of why the diseases of despair are quickly increasing among white people and not other groups.

Back to the election. One of my real fears about this election cycle is the shift in the Republican Party. Traditionally, it was a broad coalition of social conservatives and moderates, fiscal conservatives and moderates, people who believe in smaller government and low taxes, libertarians and many others. I know there are members of this church who are Republicans. One can be Unitarian Universalist and Republican. Voting Republican can be a good and ethical choice.

What I am fearful of is a shift in the party to becoming a party of white nationalism. Now, this is not a shift supported by all Republicans. After they lost the most recent presidential election, party leaders recognized that they needed to make inroads among people of color. They suggested working on comprehensive immigration reform and other policy proposals that might broaden their base of support.

But those voices weren't the loudest. Then came the leading candidate calling all Mexicans rapists and saying he would deport all undocumented immigrants. He said Muslims should be banned from entering our country. Protesters at his rallies have been physically attacked. He did not immediately disavow the endorsement of the Klu Klux Klan. His rhetoric has been echoed by other Republican candidates in calls to surveil Muslim communities, in calls to end the resettlement of Muslim refugees. This rhetoric appeals to some of those at risk for deaths of despair. They are among the loudest supporters of these sort of white nationalist policies.

¹ Khazan, Olga. 'Middle-Aged White Americans Are Dying of Despair.' *The Atlantic*. November 4, 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/11/boomers-deaths-pnas/413971/>

I am terrified of the Republican party become a white nationalist party because I know what can happen when nationalism and politics mix. As many of you know, I lived for a few years in Serbia, in the former Yugoslavia. I was there 15 years after the wars that tore Yugoslavia, a multiethnic state, a religiously diverse state apart into seven small countries that are largely ethnically and religiously homogeneous. I don't want to be overdramatic, but I also know that all of my Yugoslav friends and colleagues never thought it could happen there. They told me stories of how everyone got along until the politicians weaponized nationalism to serve their own ambitions.

One of the ways that the politicians and religious leaders in the former Yugoslavia stoked nationalism was through national myths. They discarded the complicated truths of history and replaced them with simple stories that serve their interest. In Serbia it was a myth about a battle in 1389. Here, it's slogans like "Make America Great Again."

"Make America Great Again," the slogan used by Donald Trump – and "Make America Whole Again," a slogan that Hillary Clinton used briefly a few months ago are statements of myth, not policy, not history. Neither of the candidates name when America was great or whole – they are constructing a mythic past to return to, not referencing a historic moment. And these slogan appeal only to a certain segment of our country, perhaps the segment dealing with despair rooted in financial strain and internalized racial superiority. For so many, America never was great. For so many, America never was whole.

And nationalism is seductive. It gives life meaning. It helps us feel a part of something bigger than ourselves. It is a way to escape despair. Chris Hedges, a former war correspondent, wrote a whole book on this, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*. It is a powerful book, one that was invaluable to me as I tried to make sense of the nationalist wars in the former Yugoslavia and the collective trauma left in their wake. He writes,

"To those who swallow the nationalist myth, life is transformed. The collective glorification permits people to abandon their usual preoccupation with the petty concerns of daily life. They can abandon even self-preservation in the desire to see themselves as players in a momentous historical drama. This is accepted even at the expense of self-annihilation."²

We can lose ourselves in nationalism. We can lose ourselves in national myths. We can lose our pain, our petty concerns, our despair, the small anxieties that compose our lives in nationalism – for a while. It is ultimately a poison, destroying culture, destroying relationships, destroying integrity. It can come for us all, separating us into groups with rigid boundaries, groups that are fearful of one another. It is a pattern that often ends in violence that we believe serves a higher purpose. Now, I'm not predicting nationalist violence on the scale of civil war, but I do think our political discourse is degraded. We've seen violence at political rallies on the news. Our Muslim friends and neighbors right here in Kalamazoo asked the local government to affirm religious pluralism is a value that we hold here. The fact that this is even a question, that there is a need for such a resolution, is unnerving.

As Beth read earlier, Quaker educator Parker J. Palmer proclaims "If American democracy fails, the ultimate cause will not be a foreign invasion or the power of a big money or the greed and dishonesty of some elected officials or a military coup or the internal communist/socialist/fascist takeover that keeps some Americans awake at night. It will happen because we—you and I—became so fearful of each other, of our

² Hedges, Chris. *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2002. page 54

differences and of the future, that we unraveled the civic community on which democracy depends, losing our power to resist all that threatens it and call it back to its highest form.”³

So what do we do? How do we create love and hope in the midst of fear? How do we call our democracy back to its highest form?

We build up our civil society. We remember that there is power in us.

“there’s power
still in children and old
people. There’s power in swarming
the neighbors and refusing to
die. There’s power in songs.

We support the church, local nonprofits, the PTA, political organizations, the Rotary, a book club with our time and talent and treasure. And we invite those around us to join in. Nationalism takes root when we lack social connections, when we grow to fear our neighbors because we don’t know them. It grabs hold when we lack commitment to the institutions that make up our civil society.

We need to tell the stories that show that nationalism is false. We tell the stories that dismantle fear. In the former Yugoslavia, this meant telling the stories of people of all ethnicities acting with compassion. Here, it is stories like Muslim communities sending bottled water to Flint or raising money for Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston after the shooting last year. This means, that we speak up when someone says “all Muslims are this way” or “all immigrants are that way” and tell the stories that explode those lies.

What else do we do? We promise to stay to work for love and justice. I know every election season, people say, “If so-and-so wins, I’m moving to another country.” Canada is a popular choice. The poet we heard from earlier proposed Brazil or Antarctica. If our worst case scenarios happen, however we imagine them, each of us will be needed here more than ever. All of us with all of our power and energy and influence will be needed if we are to overcome fear, overcome despair, overcome nationalism and division. If worst case scenarios come to pass, this world will be crying out for the people of love and people of hope that we aspire to be. This world will be crying out for us to be co-creators of “community in which the weak as well as the strong can flourish, love and power can collaborate, and justice and mercy can have their day.”

And, of course, when the election day arrives, we need to vote. We need to think about policy, think about our values, and vote – and encourage others to vote as well.

I close my sermon today with A segment of the final discourse of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a South Asian Muslim philosopher and imam. One month before his death in the 13th century, he said to his students:

Love all and hate none.
Mere talk of peace will avail you naught.
Mere talk of God and religion will not take you far.
Bring out all the latent powers of your being
and reveal the full magnificence of your immortal self.

³ Palmer, Parker J. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014. Kindle Edition loc. 475-8.

Be overflowing with peace and joy,
and scatter them wherever you are
and wherever you go.

Be a blazing fire of truth,
be a beautiful blossom of love
and be a soothing balm of peace.

With your spiritual light,

dispel the darkness of ignorance;

dissolve the clouds of discord and war
and spread goodwill, peace, and harmony among the people.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.