

Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
September 2, 2012

Arise My Love: On Seeing a World in Grace

This morning is the final sermon in a series called Faithful Citizenship as Spiritual Practice. By no means does this suggest that it is the last word or that today we'll neatly wrap up an often vexing, volatile and variegated subject. Our political climate at the moment should provide Exhibit A. The conversation must continue.

Thank you to those who have patiently listened over these weeks and accompanied one another and me on this pilgrimage through the prickly territory of religion and politics. For purpose of review and creating context today, especially for those who might be here or tuning in for the first time, I offer some brief synopsis as to where we've been.

First, that there is nothing wrong with the robust participation of the nation's many religious voices in debates over matters of public moment. Second, that religions – although not democracy – will almost always lose their best, most spiritual selves when they choose to be involved in the partisan, electoral side of American politics.¹ The challenge for us is to engage one another, even those with whom we disagree. All those who insist on their rightness – and me, insisting on my rightness: All of us still have a chance to gather at the river.² We can wash off the dirt there. The one caveat I add this morning is that we insist on telling the truth, as that is a basic tenet of almost every religious tradition. Needless to say, we just heard deceit named as “an evil intention that comes from the heart and defiles.”

On the other hand, as we considered last week ironically, the heart itself has the power to shape the world for good. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? The way we've organized reality no longer holds. Institutions are failing us. The human family is not served by individualism, patriarchy, a

scarcity mentality, or competition. The world is outgrowing the dualistic constructs of superior/inferior, win/lose, good/bad and domination/submission. Breaking through in their place are equality, communion, collaboration, synchronicity, expansiveness, abundance, wholeness, mutuality, intuitive knowing, and love.³ These are spiritual practices that any faithful citizen could enact to truly transform the world as we know it.

Today, we find ourselves in a Christian narrative from the gospel of Mark that is painful to hear and tempts us to disengage - again. We could easily dismiss these sanctimonious disagreements between Jesus and the religious leaders of

¹ Stephen L. Carter, *God's Name In Vain* (Basic Books: New York) 2000, 1.

² Greg Garrett, *Faithful Citizenship, Christianity and Politics for the 21st Century* (Patheos Press: Englewood, CO) 2012, e-book.

³ National Catholic Reporter. LCWR response offers new vision for being church, August 11, 2012.

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the time as embarrassing or irrelevant. The virulent tone of the passage is an urgent, if not impatient call from Jesus to reconsider the inner workings of the human heart. It does not appear that these leaders and Jesus are getting along very well. They have markedly different ideas about what's important. These righteous religious leaders, Pharisees and Scribes, are taking Jesus head on in this narrative. Notice what he does not say. He does not condemn their beliefs or denounce their important role in first century Judaism. These Jewish leaders who confront Jesus about questions of ritual purity are not petty bureaucrats. They're concerned that his disciples do not demonstrate reverence for the tradition of the elders like hand washing, which was considered such an integral part of Jewish faith and identity. Let us not forget that as Jesus turns the table on their concern – referring to them as hypocrites – he does so as a deeply religious Jew citing the prophetic tradition of Israel and denouncing the selfish interests of these Scribes and Pharisees. He calls them out and asserts that their hearts are far from God. It's good for us to stop here and consider for a moment if that has any traction in our contemporary society, cautioning us to be careful not to speak in ways that condemn whole groups of people or religious traditions that differ from us. Unless you've been asleep during this

ramped up political climate, women, immigrants, gays and lesbians, politicians, businessmen and women, rich people, poor people, Muslims, Mormons, Catholics, atheists, teachers, public workers, bankers, stockbrokers, Republicans, Democrats all come to mind. We are all guilty, every one of us of the same hardness of heart – or I'll suggest another way to think about it – the absence of grace – that Jesus urges us to avoid in the example of this gospel narrative. The emphasis on the human heart – “for it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions come...and they defile a person” – this is among the most damning of spiritual conditions revealing a lack of compassion and mercy toward others. If the heart is thought to be the center of one's will and decision making abilities, in these and throughout other scriptural texts, Christ urges us to examine our own defiled, our own polluted hearts rather than our neighbors dirty hands. We all have a way of getting trapped in righteous indignation. *Mea culpa*.

In preparing for this series, one of the many helpful sources I discovered was Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, author of a recently published book: *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. He chose the title *The Righteous Mind* to convey the sense that human nature is not just intrinsically moral, it's also intrinsically moralistic, critical and judgmental which makes it possible to produce large cooperative groups, tribes and nations without the glue of kinship. Certainly our political alliances at the moment provide a good case study.

Haidt opens his book with the famous 1992 appeal of the late Rodney King, a black man who had been beaten by LA police officers a year earlier. The acquittal of those officers triggered widespread outrage and 6 days of rioting. King's appeal “Can we all get along?” – is now so overused, Haidt contends that

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it is more often said for laughs than as a serious plea for mutual understanding. He hesitated to use it now 20 years later but decided to go ahead for two reasons.

He writes: “Most Americans nowadays are asking King’s question not about race relations but about political relations and the collapse of cooperation across party lines. Many Americans feel as though helicopters circling over the city are sending the nightly news from Washington to us, delivering dispatches from the war zone.”

The second reason he opens the book with this overused phrase is because “King followed it up with something lovely, rarely quoted. As he stumbled through his television interview, fighting back tears and often repeating himself, he found these words: Please, can we get along here. We all can get along. I mean, we’re all stuck here for a while. Let’s try to work it out.”⁴

Haidt’s book is about why it is so hard to get along. He contends that since we are all stuck here for a while; let’s at least do what we can to understand why we are so easily divided into hostile groups, each one certain of its righteousness. He concludes that it doesn’t just come down to some people are good and some are evil. Rather, our minds are designed for groupish righteousness, which makes it difficult to connect with those who live in other matrices, which are often built on different configurations of moral foundations.⁵

By way of illustration, I want to conclude today with a story I heard recently that actually made me realize how much we need moments of grace in our world. I don’t mean to be trite or trivial when I suggest this. Grace is defined simply as courteous goodwill or in religious terms, the unmerited favor of God toward others and ourselves. I must admit that I’m tired, like most of you I suspect, of the ways in which dirty, divisive politics suffocates so much of what good can still come out of the human heart and what good still needs to be enacted on every level in this country. People are suffering. And, I don’t want to lose the beautiful passage from the Song of Solomon

that Karen read earlier because whether it is a love story about two human beings or an allegory of God’s love for God’s people it poetically alludes to the transformative power of love and grace. I also hear in these passages an invitation to come into a world of grace: “Arise my love and come away – for now the winter is past the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.” However grim things may seem in our moralistic and political strife, love and grace are profoundly integrated with all of life’s realities, as harsh as they can be. Even when human hearts appear frozen and defiled, hurricanes devastate creation, and ideologies give way to righteous indignation and the fracturing of

⁴ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind, Why Good People are Divided Politics and Religion* (Pantheon Books, New York, 2012), xi-xiii.

⁵ Haidt, 317-318.

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the human family, can we still see beneath this beautiful text the possibility that listen, look and arise may yield? Can the examination of our hearts deliver us into a new vision that summons us forth still to see and participate in a grace-filled world?

In Roanoke, VA, between March and May of this year, Jordan Addison's car was vandalized four separate times with homophobic slurs and other hate speech, with damage totaling around \$2,500.

A manager at Quality Auto Paint and Body heard Addison's story and organized ten local businesses to pitch in and repair Addison's car free of charge. The upgrade included new tires, windows and a paint job, alongside a new stereo and security system - \$10,000 worth of work.

Jordan Addison, a local university student was targeted because he is gay. I doubt that all of the people and businesses that responded to this situation have the same political and religious affinities. In fact, it is likely they don't and disagree on any number of things. The point is they acted out of a deeper place in the heart, out of grace, out of care, that gave them the ability to transcend ideologies and self-interests. They are generous. They are equitable. They are faithful citizens.

We are all stuck here for a while. Let's try to work it out.