

A LEGACY OF THE REFORMATION: THE STEWARDSHIP OF OUR VOTE

Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

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***Prayer:** By your Spirit, O God, let us hear your word, that we may know your truth and follow you with new resolve to work for the coming of the reign of Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.*

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

I don't know if any of you are aware of it, but there is an election coming up. Really! A week from Tuesday. A presidential election! (Do I have your attention now?) I have to admit that the easy thing for me would be to preach on the Gospel text for the day, which is that one lovely story about Zacchaeus, the diminutive hated tax collector who climbed a tree so that he could see Jesus pass by, and Jesus invites him to dinner ... a pretty radical thing in those days, because as Rebekah so clearly put it last week, tax collectors were not popular.

That would be the easy thing to preach on this Reformation Sunday. EXCEPT for what Martin Luther, one of the founders of the Reformation, said about conversion. He said that three things needed to be converted if indeed it was a true conversion: a conversion of the heart, the mind, and *the purse*. We Presbyterians do a pretty good job with the mind; an OK job with the heart, but when it comes to the purse, well, we fall short of Zacchaeus who promised to give away half of his possessions. So I could go there, but I decided to go with something safe and non-controversial: politics.

Though we are more than aware of the election coming up, we are not the only ones. Two weeks ago I spent some time with some incredibly faithful Presbyterian leaders in Cuba. I could write a

book on what we can learn from them, but it does give me a chance not only to look at them but to look at me and my faith and the country I love so much.

One woman, a pastor of a small rural church said something that has haunted me ever since. “I know you talk a lot about democracy, and don’t get me wrong, there is much I envy about your country. But if the way your election is being run is what democracy is all about, then I’m not so sure I want us to go there.”

Now, you can argue with that statement, you can challenge it and disagree with it, but she is not alone. This morning’s Commercial Appeal had an article about the way young Americans and Europeans are losing faith in democracy. I think most of us will be glad when the election is over. We’ll take a hot shower and try to move on, but it won’t be easy! David Brooks in the New York Times shared this week that mental health therapists are saying that ¾ of their patients are mentioning significant election-related anxiety. The American Psychological Association published a study that found that over one-half of all Americans are very or somewhat stressed about the election. As he wrote: “Anxiety is coursing through American society. It has become its own destructive character on the national stage.”

Keeping in mind that it is Reformation Sunday and that God is always doing a new thing, what new thing are we eager to catch a glimpse of in our lives, our congregations, our communities, and the world? There is no shortage of doom and gloom and the sky-is-surely-falling talk as the election draws near. The language is apocalyptic, but without hope. There are visions being cast, but virtually none of them include a discussion of justice for the oppressed, the reconciliation of peoples long silenced, and total silence about one of the most pressing issues facing humanity—climate change. We are anticipating something, but what?

Which brings us, not yet to the Reformation and Martin Luther and John Calvin, but to the old prophet Habakkuk. Not a name like Isaiah or Jeremiah or Micah that we know, but significant nonetheless.

Habakkuk lived in a time of great anxiety and upheaval and turmoil. People were worried. We don’t know the precise historical background of his writing, because Habakkuk allowed his theological convictions to overwhelm his attention to historical detail. He had a difficult time discerning where God was at work in the sometimes radical political changes of his day. At moments he felt God was absent—had abandoned the world to chaos.

*“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “violence” and you do not save? ...
Strife and contention arise ...
... and justice never prevails.”*

But he gave voice to those feelings...God can handle them, you know. And ultimately, he managed to come to the understanding that perhaps more important than his ability to discern where and how God was at work, was a willingness to affirm *that* God was at work, even where he, Habakkuk, had no ability to discern God’s activity. Habakkuk came to the conviction that human beings, with-

out discerning God's every move within history can, nevertheless, trust that God is at work. This trust in God is a solid foundation upon which to stand in the midst of chaos.

Later on Paul, in his letter to the Romans, quoted Habakkuk as he began to articulate his own understanding of the trustworthiness of God..." the righteous shall live by faith." And then in the 16th century, a period of time characterized by enormous changes and threatening upheaval, Martin Luther found a place to stand. He stood upon a conviction articulated by old Habakkuk.

And Luther's ideas spread like wildfire across Europe, especially three of them: We are justified, he said, not by our works, or good deeds, or prayers, but by grace through faith; he suggested "the priesthood of all believers," not just a select few who are ordained. (On the back of our bulletin reads: Ministers: All the members of Idlewild Presbyterian Church) and third, the centrality of Scripture as the way we know God's will—not simply the teachings of the church.

It was in Geneva Switzerland, that a brilliant lawyer and humanist scholar John Calvin liked Luther's ideas, but felt that Luther didn't go far enough. He was persuaded to establish a new, Reformed Church. His ideas on participatory government—in church and state—were revolutionary. He taught that "individuals have the right to elect pastors and leaders in the church, and magistrates in the city." He taught that "God alone is Lord of the conscience," and every individual has both the right and the responsibility of personal liberty.¹ And he taught that kings were not divinely appointed, which is why he had to flee as a refugee from his native France.

Calvin, in his brilliance, looked at scripture (including this passage from Habakkuk), and read the classics, including non-Christian Greek philosophers, as well as his own experience and belief both in the exalted view of human potential from his humanistic perspective, (as the Psalmist wrote "we are a little lower than angels") and yet also in the doctrine of human depravity, or original sin, which reminds us that humans inevitably "fall short of the glory of God."

One theologian summarized the balance this way: Because he understood human nature so honestly, Calvin distrusted all authority and thought that the best guarantee against the abuse of authority was education and a political system of checks and balances.²

He believed education was the key, so across the street from Calvin's church in Geneva there still stands the Lay Academy which he founded, so adults could learn the basics of scripture and theology so that they could be equipped for their duties—not just in the church, but also "in the city streets, in the marketplace, and in the body politic." Because, as he said, Christian responsibility didn't end at the door to the church, but spilled out into believers' daily lives, to contribute to the civic good.

Eventually his ideas made their way to Scotland by his student, John Knox, and in 1620 were brought over the pond to the colonies. The legacy of these early American Presbyterians is the form of government the United States enjoys today. They brought with them their distrust of authority, (they had seen its abuses), but also their notion of God's sovereignty and individual rights, their commitment to education and their intention to put their religion to work in the public sphere, not simply in their sparse, lean and very cold churches. They were strong partisans

of the American Revolution. They recognized the spirit of Calvin in the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence. And the only clergy person to sign the Declaration was John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister schooled in the theology of Calvin. That was controversial at the time, because even back then there were those who said the church, and preachers, shouldn't be involved in political activity.

So predominate were Presbyterians in those days that in London, they called the revolution "The Presbyterian Rebellion." And as a Lutheran church historian said "It could be said that the Constitution is indeed a Presbyterian document."

Well, enough of history. Habakkuk, Paul, Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Witherspoon. The real question is "What difference does any of this make today?" I, for one, would like to believe that we Presbyterians still make good citizens, because of the theological values we hold dear:

- Because we believe that God, in God's sovereignty, has established political leadership for the well-being of humanity, and that when conscience allows, we ought to obey those rightly elected to govern;
- Because we believe that God alone is Lord of the conscience; neither the state nor the church can tell you who to vote for; but we are all accountable to God for our choices; and finally,
- Because we believe that each of us bears Christian responsibility for the common good. Calvin's purpose for the church, and I dare say ours as well, was not exclusively the salvation of the individual souls of the city, but that the social, political, and economic life of Geneva be formed according to the word of God. That led to the mantra of the Reformation: "the church reformed, and always being reformed according to the Word of God."

Cynthia Campbell, former president of McCormick Seminary in Chicago, summed it up this way: Reformed Christians would advocate that the care of its more vulnerable members—children, the elderly, the poor, the immigrant—is not simply a matter of personal or even ecclesiastical philanthropy, although it is certainly that. Our tradition would suggest that care for those in need is something the society as a whole should provide through its civic structures. —what Calvin called the common good of society.³

Maybe this is the most important contribution of our Presbyterian Church and the Reformed tradition: when we vote next week, we vote not just as Republicans or Democrats or Independents, nor as people who are in it for ourselves, but first and foremost as Christians who seek the common good. Therefore the question is not "What's in it for me?" but under what leadership will the common good best flourish?

There is one last thing to celebrate this Reformation Sunday. In spite of the unprecedented contention of this election season, we are reminded with Habakkuk and Calvin that in *all things* we are dealing with God. Good things and bad things. Calm and chaotic things. Frightening things.

Changing things which threaten us. In all things we are dealing with God, and so when election day is over, we will move on together. I found an article Garrison Keillor wrote 12 years ago before another election that reminded us what a stunning gift this is:

“A year of passion has come to a boil. Every morning my e-mail box is full of forwarded political diatribes and manifestos ... Some in my family are exchanging fiery emails, with hard, jagged sentences IN ALL CAPITAL LETTERS SO THE POINT IS NOT MISSED, and scripture is quoted, the elitist liberal baby killers versus the Brown-shirt storm troopers ... and what will come of all this the day after election day? Some will pick up the morning paper and save it for a souvenir, and others will wrap the garbage in it.

What will reconcile us is what has always restored our sanity, and that is the plain pleasures of the physical world, our common love of coffee, the world of apples, the movements of the birds, the lives of dogs, the touch of skin. Music ... shooting baskets, lacing u our skates, gliding through the dusk. Having worked ourselves into a fever over the future of Western civilization, we will now begin enjoying our oatmeal again, with raisons, chopped apricots and honey from bees that grazed in the meadows of clover. The beauty of engagement is disengagement. You simply put on your jacket and walk out the door and find good health. There is no fever that a 10 mile hike can't cure.”⁴

The election matters, of course, perhaps more than just about any election in memory. So much is at stake, or we wouldn't be nearly as divided as we are. Yet, in spite of the contention of this season, when the last vote is counted, we will move on together, and this my friends, is a legacy of our Reformed tradition: that each individual votes, but the majority rules; that, barring tyranny or unjust leaders, governance is a gift from God for the common good; and that, somehow, in spite of our sinful human nature, God's sovereignty will prevail. That is no small legacy, I think. And it makes me proud to be a Presbyterian.

So do you want to hear my election advice? I pass on to you that which I have received. On the eve of another contentious election, the minister rose to speak to the assembly of citizens preparing to vote. He gave them this advice: “Choose your leaders with a pure conscience, without regard to anything but the honor and glory of God, for the safety and defense of the republic ... for the common good.”

The year was 1560; the speaker was John Calvin. I couldn't have said it better myself.

Amen.

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¹ John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: On God and Political Duty*, Indianapolis: The Bobs-Merrill Co., 1950. P. 84.

² John Buchanan, “A Reforming Faith for a Changing World,” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 5/21/89.

³ Cynthia Campbell, “A Call to Citizenship, Answering the Challenge of Political Life,” www.pcusa.org/washintgon/campbell.htm.

⁴ How to Break the Political Fever, *Time*, November 1, 2004. (But it could have been written today!)