



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

November 13, 2016

A Time for Everything

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: November 18, 2016

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

I was sitting in my office on Thursday afternoon when all of a sudden I heard a band outside playing the Marine Corps Hymn. A group from the high school was marching around our parking lot, and I knew the tune immediately because I grew up listening to it. My mother was in the Marines in World War II, and my father was in the Army, and in the post-war decades of my childhood we heard military and patriotic songs all the time. November 10 is a memorable day to me for lots of reasons: it's the birthday of the Protestant reformer Martin Luther in 1483, the birthday of the U. S. Marine Corps in 1775, and the birthday of my daughter in 1989, the very day after the Berlin Wall started to come down. Friday was Veteran's Day, and Tuesday was Election Day, so it's been a big week in lots of ways, both public and personal.

The whole nation, of course, has been processing the results of the election, with a wide range of feelings. Some people are jubilant because they enthusiastically supported the candidates who won. Some are basically satisfied with the outcome because, in spite of whatever misgivings they might have had, they still consider this result to be better than any of the alternatives. Other people are deeply dismayed, appalled at things that were said and done and revealed during the campaign, and some of them are truly afraid of what might happen to people they care about as a result of this election. The country has lots of people in all three groups, and so does our congregation.

I used to teach a college course on religion in American politics and law, and as I explained in a seminar

here a few weeks ago, it's not appropriate for the church to come out for or against any particular party or candidate, but it's always been part of the minister's responsibility to offer a pastoral perspective on matters of national importance. It's the preacher's job to lift up biblical principles to guide Christian behavior, not only in our private lives but also in our life together as a community and a nation. That can be a challenge when people have strong feelings on opposite sides, but it's the responsibility of all Christians to be faithful and speak the truth in love, so let me begin with a few simple facts to put things in perspective.

First, according to the results I've read, only 55.4% of eligible Americans voted in the presidential election. That's just a little more than half. Within that number, 26.5% voted for Hillary Clinton, 26.3% voted for Donald Trump, and the rest voted for somebody else. In round numbers, then, the two major party candidates each received just over one-fourth of the potential votes, and the candidate who won the electoral college, and therefore the election, did not actually win the popular vote. The way our system works, Donald Trump is the legitimately elected president, and we should all pray that God will give him wisdom to lead our country faithfully in ways that are good for everyone. At the same time, neither major party candidate can pretend to have a great popular mandate, with only about a quarter of the population voting for each of them.

The second obvious fact is that a single party will soon control the White House, the Senate, and the House of Representatives, and will have the power to appoint Supreme Court justices who may serve for decades. For the next two years, at least, and possibly for much longer, the responsibility for governing at the national level will rest largely with that party, while the entire country and the whole

world will be watching and reacting to what they do. Once again, we should pray for them and encourage them to do what is right and just for all people within our nation, and be wise in dealing with other nations.

The last fact I want to mention, again rather obviously, is that this election brought out some deep divisions within our society, and enormous frustrations, especially among those whose economic situation has been flat or declining over the past several decades. I know some of those white, non-college-educated, underemployed blue collar people who figured so prominently in this election because I grew up with them. My father, brother, uncle, and cousin all worked in steel mills in the Mon Valley that no longer exist, and the mills started to decline in the 1980s, long before the North American Free Trade Agreement. The last few decades have been very good for people at or near the top, but not so good for people who used to be able to support their families at the mill and now try to get by on jobs that pay half as much, or less. Those mills are not coming back to where they were in the 1960s, because of automation, competition, and other factors; and unless our political and business leaders find ways to employ more people in jobs that pay a living wage with decent benefits, we're only going to see more of the anger, resentment, and scapegoating that have surfaced so conspicuously in this last year. That won't be good for anyone, and it won't be good for our democracy.

In our overheated public discourse these days, we frequently hear about people "demonizing" their opponents. That's mostly a metaphor to us, but in today's gospel lesson it's literally what Jesus' opponents do to him. Jesus goes about healing and casting out demons, and his antagonists literally accuse him of having a demon, or being demonic himself. Less thoughtful people, it seems, have always been

willing to accuse those they don't like of the worst evil they can imagine. But the accusation, ridiculous as it is, prompts Jesus to say that if demons are casting out demons then their own house is divided, and a house divided against itself cannot stand. Jesus' reminder about the dangers of divisiveness has come down through the ages as a warning to every generation. Abraham Lincoln famously invoked the image in our Civil War, and we would do well to remember it in the uncivil culture wars of our own day.

Today's Old Testament lesson brings us the poetic lines that became a folk song: "To everything there is a season...." People who are inclined to cherry pick texts cling to the parts they like, and leave out the parts that don't suit their interests. There is a time for everything, the Bible says. Some people focus on the time to heal and build up and love, and the time for peace, while others emphasize the time to kill and break down and hate, and the time for war. Each group savors the parts they like and spits out the other parts like so many cherry pits.

The overall sense of the passage, though, is that there is a time for everything, and wisdom consists in knowing what time it is, and acting accordingly. On Veterans Day, especially, we remember that there is a time for war, as when almost everyone would say it was right to stand up against Hitler, for example, though no one yearned for a time of peace to follow more than the soldiers and veterans themselves. If there is a time to hate, it is always to hate evil and injustice and unnecessary suffering; and if there is a time to love it is every time we encounter our neighbors, whether we always agree with them or not.

There was a little essay in the *Post-Gazette* the other day by Professor Junlei Li, who is co-director of the Fred

Rogers Center at Saint Vincent College. Professor Li talked about how Mr. Rogers helped children, and the grownups who also watched *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, work through all sorts of difficult things. He says, “Fred taught children—all of us—that it is not winning or losing that ultimately nourishes our souls. Life’s most important and noble work is to look and listen to our neighbors and ‘find what is healthy and laudable about somebody else and reflect that to them....”

Professor Li reminds us that *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* was first broadcast nationally in 1968, the year that Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, the Vietnam War was raging, and there were riots in many American cities. We’ve been through challenging times before, and we’ll go through them again, and the task is always to try to understand one another and create the conditions where all people can find peace and justice and reconciliation.

Professor Li says, “I am heartbroken with the results of the national election. But I also have come to realize that I’ve been failing to empathize with the equally intense feelings of neighbors who would have felt just as badly if the election had turned out otherwise. I’ve been failing to do what Mr. Rogers almost always did: listen. I judged instead.” One of the things we need most in our time is to listen to one another, when so much of our rhetoric and the one-sided sources of information simply caricature and demonize opponents, and shout the other person down.

Julian of Norwich, a Christian theologian and mystic, wrote about spiritual strength and peace in her own tumultuous fourteenth century. She’s quoted as saying, “All shall be well, all shall be well For there is a Force of love

moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go.” The Christian faith reminds us that our hope lies not in princes or presidents or political parties, but only in God, who is always faithful and who alone can heal our wounds and save our souls and redeem this world, though God holds each of us accountable for doing what is right in the meantime. There is a time for everything, and God is present and active in every time and place.

Professor Li quotes a prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Protestant theologian of the twentieth century who shed more light on our public life from a Christian perspective than anyone else, before or since. Niebuhr is the source of the Serenity Prayer that many of us know in the form “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Niebuhr’s original prayer was written in the plural, though. It talked about “us” and “we,” because Christianity is not just a private affair but a practice for living together in the wider world. Towards the end of his essay Professor Li quotes another one of Niebuhr’s prayers, and it’s a fitting way to end this morning:

God, who has made us creatures of time, so that every tomorrow is an unknown country and every decision a venture in faith: Help us, creatures of day, blind to the future, to enter it in the confidence that neither life nor death shall separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.



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