

Sermon: To Be of Service

Kent French, United Parish in Brookline

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Philippians 2:1-8

In democratic societies such as ours, we have this idea of Public Service. A public servant is, quite simply, someone who has chosen to dedicate her or his life to *serv*ing the public, the *people*. It sounds very noble, very altruistic, and at its best, it really is – the idea that you want to devote your life to making life better for everyone around you, however big or small your sphere of influence.

We lose a sense of this sense of vocation in modern political campaigns.

Public service gets lost in the morass of ambition, lost in millions of dollars spent on ad campaigns and canvassing strategies. Instead, political campaigns become a matter of choosing sides, about us vs. them and becoming so entrenched in that duality that we begin to disregard outright anything that the opposition says.

We stop listening. Our hearts harden. We get stuck in our own opinions, our own stubborn mindsets.

And the campaigns become about personalities. They become the image-bearers, mascots practically, for each team, magnified thousands of times on giant jumbo-trons, so that every twitch, every smirk, every tear, every misstep, every careless word is scrutinized, analyzed, judged, and locked into a hardening perception of who this person really is and what she or he stands for.

If you've been through political campaigns year in, year out, you've seen this over and over, and the process is worsening and becoming ever more expensive with each new contest.

The idea of public service is rarely ever emphasized.

Now, there are tireless public servants out there. Most of them are unsung heroes who work doggedly away from the spotlight, away from the television camera.

The municipal trash collector,

The town clerk,

The parking attendant,

The mail carrier, who is out there in rain, sleet, sun or snow,

The social worker, accountant or policy wonk, who helps people find adequate housing, education and health care,

The tireless legislator – who quietly and persistently champions issues that will really makes a difference in the community and sees his or her use of public funds as a sort of sacred trust, requiring honesty, integrity and good discernment.

In other countries, they take the language of service a step further and refer to their departments of government as “ministries,” like the Ministry of Culture or Finance or Justice, whole sections of their national trust defined by their ability to minister or ad-minister to the people.

What has happened to our sense of service?

You and I have just been through a lot of unpleasantness. A travesty of public discourse. Coarse talk. Loose language. Enraged crowds. Lack of civility. Preying upon people's fears and anxieties. It's been reminiscent of some campaigns of our deeper past – George Wallace, Joe McCarthy, William Jennings Bryan, Father Charles Coughlin, Huey Long, even Andrew Jackson ~ just a lot bigger, a lot more closely watched, and a lot closer to power.

There hasn't been much talk of service to country amid all the noise.

Like many of you, like most all our pollsters, I stayed up into the wee hours of Tuesday night surprised by what I saw. This progressive bubble I live in was popped. Perhaps it should have been popped sooner...

When I try to pull the lens way back and get a God's eye view of what is going on in our country right now, here's what I come up with.

First of all, as nations go, we're still relatively young. We know how it began. Please permit me a moment to review it with you briefly.

Nearly 400 years ago, Europeans first started coming to this land because they needed more room, they needed more freedom, freedom to worship and conduct their lives the way they wanted, without government interference. They were seeking to live their lives the ways they thought God wanted – in a sort of utopian theocracy, just 40 miles from here.

Other people came here because they wanted economic opportunity, to stake their claim, make some wealth in a new, more open place.

In the process of seeking these freedoms and growing in numbers, these European newcomers made wave after wave of trespasses against the people who were already here, forcibly exterminating and oppressing most of them and backing their survivors into forsaken corners of the land.

That's what got us all started here.
There's some nobility, vision, daring and purpose in it.
There's also a lot of bloodshed, pain and oppression.
Frankly, our history is a mess of contradictions.

About 150 years into this American project, a bunch of well-to-do men came together from the various colonies to figure out how to wrest their independence from the sponsoring British monarchy. As these visionary elites met, they dreamed about what their new independence might look like.

In that dream, about half of them wanted to keep slavery.
Slavery was, after all, an entrenched and economically beneficial practice – at least as old as the stories of the Bible.

The other half did not. The idea of abolition was already gaining ground across the ocean.

They left their convention, determined to seek independence, but agreeing to disagree about slavery.

No one embodied this disagreement better than Thomas Jefferson, who with the same hand wrote that “all men are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” while owning slaves himself.

We are all still here because they fought for and got the independence, but this basic disagreement of our founding ballooned and festered like an untreated wound until it erupted 85 years later into the deadliest conflict this young country has ever known.

We had a brilliant, eloquent sage leading us at that time, a humbly-born man, named Abraham after the father of the Israelites, who called us “to the better angels of our nature,” who sought to keep everybody together and who freed the slaves. He saved the union, and would lose his life in the process.

Now, 150 years after that conflict ended, I look at our electoral maps and I think we just keep re-drawing the lines of the Civil War, and the lines of our disagreements over and over again.

Where the lines were once about slavery, now they’re about race, about immigration, about sexual orientation, about abortion and women’s equality.

There are those of us who want to *conserve* the tradition, who want to keep things the way they have been, who want a sort of hierarchy and orderliness that keep things under control.

There are those of us who want to preserve and *conserve* our economic ascendancy at all costs, even costs to liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

There are those of us who want to *liberate* us to new daring ideas, to drawing the circle ever wider about who is included in the rights of citizenship, regardless of religion, race, sexual orientation, or country of origin. We want to loosen up the things that bind us.

And year after year, we can generally predict which states are going to go which way, with a small number of toss-up places where the ideas are in constant conflict.

If you look in our major cities, where people regularly encounter, struggle with and also enjoy a broader diversity of backgrounds, you’ll find more of this liberal, liberating approach. Diversity forces you to confront difference.

If you go to some of our suburbs, more rural, more traditional or more homogenously populated parts of the country, you’ll find more of this conserving approach.

Over the course of my lifetime, I have experienced us as a primarily conservatively governed nation:

8 years of Reagan’s neo-conservatism

4 years of George HW Bush’s compassionate conservatism

8 years of a moderate Democrat Bill Clinton whose personal failings kept him nipped at by conservatives,

8 years under George W Bush and back to neo-conservatism

I have also noticed, ironically, that for the past 24 years, our left-of-center Democratic party has won the popular vote in six out of the last seven presidential elections, including this past Tuesday. And in that

same time, we've seen more people of color and women come to power. We saw it in the Congressional races this past week – the Indian-American, African-American, Vietnamese-American, Somali-American women going to Congress. And on a personal note, as a gay man, I have watched how change and acceptance has come to my particular minority with relatively breath-taking speed over the course of my lifetime.

This has been a liberalizing trend.

So there is this sort of diagonal crossing of liberal and conservative trends. To people outside the United States, it must seem all so strange and confusing. It's strange and confusing to us.

So, I believe, if we are going to honor the spirit of our founders, if we are going to honor the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, we have got to stay in the conversation, despite our differences. We've got to open our ears, open our minds, soften our hearts and really listen. Not agree on everything, but listen.

Clinton supporters have got to talk to Trump supporters and Trump supporters with Clinton supporters – not to argue, but to find out, “What are you really for?” “What do you really care about?” “What scares you?” Believe, me, I've got to re-ignite this process in my family.

One of my favorite phrases in our small study groups come from Parker Palmer: When the going gets rough, turn to wonder, turn to curiosity.

When I look at the past 8 years of a progressive-leaning presidency, I know how happy it made many of us in Eastern Massachusetts. Throughout our history, we've often been on the forefront of such progressive politics. Over the two past decades, we were progressive on certain issues long before the President or Secretary Clinton got on board.

But for our more conservative sisters and brothers, I believe it was too much social change, too fast, too much openness, not enough order. And certainly not enough deep economic improvement across the country. There are many in our country who were already feeling broken, beaten and forgotten by the establishment, by the media – not just in our inner cities, but in rural areas and burnt-out towns. They live a world away from “liberal elites” who are riding high on the information-age economy.

These hurting people I am most curious about. Many of them are the ones who drove this election. Many of them are also the people who put hope in Barack Obama.

When I try to follow Jesus, I truly believe he was a liberal, a progressive. I've thought that since my Baptist Sunday School days.

I also believe he was a conservative.

He wanted to conserve the tradition of the law, but he also wanted to liberate it with new interpretations.

He wanted to show respect for the tradition of the faith, but he also wanted to expand God's kind of love to people traditionally *excluded* from the faith.

He wanted to value the patriarchs and matriarchs' embrace of the stranger in their midst and the prophet's admonitions to care for the widows and orphans, for the least of those among us.

He wanted to *conserve* those *liberal* ideals.

He wanted us to conserve the traditional commandments of loving God with all our heart, all our soul and all our strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves and then liberate them for the truly radical possibility they contain.

Above all, Jesus wanted us to serve others. He want us to bind up the broken, to care for the weak, give sight to the blind, heal the sick, release the prisoners and the oppressed and proclaim the year of God's favor.

Service is at the heart of the Christian faith

As we heard in our scripture today: the pioneer of our faith, emptied himself,
 taking the form of a servant,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself

Jesus would want us to reach out to and minister to people
 who are afraid and hurting:
 because they fear their race or their immigration status or their gender or sexuality will put them in
 peril,
 people who feel left behind after each new technological advancement or twist in our economy
 people who fear a dying away of the old ways and old demographics, and wonder where their place
 is in this new reality.
 people who think we're not doing enough to defend ourselves from ISIS or other external threats

At the same time, Jesus would have no tolerance for the
 scourge of white supremacy
 no tolerance for racism or racist rhetoric
 the man who told stories about the Good Samaritan and who honored the Abrahamic tradition of
 welcoming the stranger would have no tolerance for xenophobia
 the man whose ministry was all about the Good News of Love would have no tolerance for
 homophobia
 the man who befriended and uplifted women in his ministry and whose resurrection was first
 witnessed by the courageous and caring women at the tomb, would have no tolerance for misogyny.
 the man who like the prophets before him lifted up the least powerful among us, would not
 tolerate bullying.

We've heard a lot about what we are against in this election cycle. I want to know what are we for??

As Christians, we are for seeing the image of God in one another.
 We are for calling out the "better angels of our nature."
 We are for seeking out and helping those who get left out, left behind, forgotten.

We may be entering an era in which we have to do that even more fervently, even more passionately, with
 even more commitment and resolve than before.

We need to resolve to commit our resources to movements and organizations that cherish these values.

We need to resolve to be a church that is even bolder in this kind of witness, this kind of commitment of service for the greater good, for the Gospel of Love, for the wideness of God's mercy.

This week I've heard several ideas:

perhaps we should develop a relationship with a church in an economically depressed region of a red state, so that we can learn more about what people there think, feel and believe – and hopefully respectfully share what we think, feel and believe. Perhaps even share resources.

Another idea is to have a monthly “Day of Love” where we check in about what we're doing individually and collectively for the demonstration of God's love in the world, to support one another in our resolve.

I know that we are going to continue to work on ending mass incarceration here in Massachusetts and becoming better stewards of God's green Earth, regardless of what this administration does.

And we need to pray fervently, to believe open-mindedly, to expect unceasingly and to hold the new administration accountable to do everything in its power to bring us together as a people, to change the rhetoric of the campaign to the rhetoric of responsible governance.

On an everyday level, there is a movement afoot to invite those who want to be allies in public places to wear a safety pin clearly and visibly wherever they go.

My friend and colleague, Molly Baskette, shared a social media meme about this with our UCC denomination this week:

If you wear a hijab, I'll sit with you on the train.

If you're trans, I'll go into the bathroom with you.

If you're a person of color, I'll stand with you if the cops stop you.

If you're a person with disabilities, I'll hand you my megaphone.

If you're an immigrant, I'll help you find resources.

If you're a survivor, I'll believe you.

If you're a refugee, I'll make sure you're welcome.

If you're a veteran, I'll take up your fight.

If you're LGBTQ, I'll remind you that you are beautiful and beloved, just as God made you.

If you're a woman, I'll make sure you get home ok.

If you've been left behind by the new economy, I'll help you get through it.

If you're an elder, I'll listen to your stories.

If you're tired, me too.

If you need a hug, I've got an infinite supply.

If you need me, I'll be with you. All I ask is that you be with me, too.

Together, we'll show the love of God.

That is our calling. That is our charge. To be the hands and feet of Christ in a broken and hurting world. To be the servants of others.

Nothing more is required and nothing less is acceptable.

I am ready, as a child of God, a follower of Christ, to recommit myself to this task of public and Christian service and I ask you to join me.

Amen.