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What Is a Reformed View of Politics?

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Genesis 17:1-8; Matthew 1:1-6a, 17

Scripture is concerned with history, and we should be, as well. If we are not, as George Santayana famously observed, we “are condemned to repeat it.”

That warning came to mind yesterday as we heard about the terrible shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Anti-Semitism has spiked in America; the number of hateful incidents directed at Jews rose last year by 57%. Something is going wrong in our midst.

Political discourse hasn’t helped. When Neo-Nazis march and rally and are not clearly and resoundingly denounced by our leaders, that sends signals to those with hate in their hearts.

If we forget the long history of bigotry and violence against Jews, we will repeat it. If we forget the long history of injustice and violence against indigenous people in this land, we will repeat it. If we forget the long history of the enslavement of African people in America and violence directed against them and their descendants, we will repeat it. If we forget the long history of mistreatment and violence against women and

immigrants and people of differing sexual orientation and identity we will repeat it.

Our faith is rooted in history. Scripture goes out of its way to show the connections from one generation to another, to weave the threads of memory and experience, of joy and lament, through the long years of the human story. Scripture wants us not to forget.

When the Bible includes lists of the generations, as we heard in Matthew's gospel, that precede us, it does so to remind us that we do not exist in a vacuum. We are tethered to a people and to values and to narratives of meaning. We are not alone. We are not the first to struggle with what it means to confront the baser impulses of the human heart, or to live in fractured community, or to seek out a God who can sometimes seem distant.

The gospel of Matthew opens with a recitation of the generations that stretch from Abraham through David. Fourteen generations. Then another fourteen up to the time of Babylonian exile. Then fourteen more to the birth of the Messiah.

Matthew doesn't mention women in the genealogy, except when it's necessary to bridge a gap from one generation to another. A man who cannot produce an heir with the correct lineage has to rely on an outsider woman. Then Matthew includes them, otherwise the entire biblical story would come to an abrupt end. It's the patriarchy's grudging way of acknowledging that women matter in the story.

What would it look like to extend the telling of the generations, from Jesus on...Paul, Lydia, Origen, Perpetua and Felicity, Monica, the desert mothers and fathers, St. Columba...up to the time of the Great Schism of Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054.

Then Hildegard of Bingen, Peter Waldo, Julian of Norwich, Jan Hus, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila...and on to the time of the Protestant Reformation. Then Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, our Presbyterian ancestor, Beza, Knox. Four of them are enshrined in our windows, once again suggesting there were no women involved. *There were*. We should have four other windows with Marie Dentiere, Marguerite de Navarre, Argula von Grumbach, and Olympia Morata – ancestors from that era and leaders in the faith.

The generations continue with Bartolomé de las Casas, John Winthrop, John Wesley, Chief Joseph, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Sitting Bull, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gene Robinson. Who would you put into that lineage?

We're all linked by the flow of history, passing along the wisdom of the ages, the stories of pain and suffering, the moments of redemption. We're not making up our faith as we go along. We've received it and are carrying it forward, to the generations that follow. We are stewards in our time of the hope at the heart of our faith.

It's Reformation Sunday, when we celebrate the stream of Christian history in which we stand as Protestants. We open with John Calvin's hymn and will close with Martin Luther's. It's also nine days before an election that has highlighted and heightened tensions among us. We're anxious in America, and afraid. The divisive rancor is endless and exhausting. Our politics are tearing us apart.

In the midst of the chaos in which we find ourselves, our faith, our Protestant, reformed faith, can help us navigate the politics of these times in which we live.

"Do Politics Belong in Church?" the cover of a recent issue of a Christian journal asks. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who conspired against Hitler, has a response. "As much as the Christian would like to

remain distant from political struggle,” Bonhoeffer says, “Nonetheless, even here the commandment of love urges the Christian to stand up for their neighbor.” (*Sojourners*, p. 19, Feb 2018)

If we want religion that doesn't engage in politics – not *partisan* politics, but the kind of politics that involves “standing up for our neighbors” on the receiving end of hatred and poverty, prejudice and violence – if that's what we want to avoid, then we had better find another savior.

What's a reformed, or Presbyterian, view of politics? The response to that question begins with the notion of *covenant*, which we learned from the Jews. *Covenant* refers to the bond between God and humanity. God promises never to abandon humankind; that bond becomes the model for all human relationships, including between two people, or in a family, or in the community, or in the relationship between rulers and people, between government and citizens. Politics, in the Presbyterian understanding, is based on God's call to life in *covenantal community*.

Covenant goes back through our biblical ancestry to Abram. When God establishes a covenant between them, *Abram* becomes *Abraham*. He's given a new name; that's what happens when someone comes into covenant with God. That's what was happening in the Tree of Life Synagogue yesterday. When the shooting started they were in the midst of the naming ritual for a new baby, marking the start of that child's covenantal life with God.

For Abraham the new name as he comes into covenant with God is also a sign that he will be the father of a long line of descendants – the very line that stretches through the Hebrew people to the Messiah, and then on through the early church, and to Roman Catholicism, and to the Reformation and into our time.

Covenant theology of the Presbyterians played a key role in the development of democracy in America. H. Richard Niebuhr writes that for Presbyterians,

“The world has this fundamental moral structure of a covenant society and that what is possible and required in the political realm is the affirmation and reaffirmation of humanity’s responsibility as a promise-maker, promise-keeper, a covenanter in universal community.”

(Quoted in “The Concept of Covenant in 16th and 17th Century Continental and British Reformed Theology” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, Donald K. McKim, ed. [Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1992], p. 95)

Three dimensions of covenant have particular relevance for American democracy today.

First, *covenant life is inclusive*. “There is no longer Jew or Greek,” the Apostle Paul writes,

“There is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the covenant.”
(Galatians 3:28-29)

America was established with that covenant principle of inclusivity enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, when it states “that all men” – *all human beings* we would say today – “are created equal (and) endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” All are included because all have the same rights and are equal before the law.

Democracy depends on inclusivity. That principle is under assault today. Some appear to be created *more* equal than others. The growing gap between those with power and resources and those without such privilege runs counter to the biblical admonition to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Racism destroys the promise of community. Differing treatment by law enforcement and the criminal justice system betrays the assurance of equal rights. The true measure of the success of a society is not how well those at the top are doing, but how well the most vulnerable are faring.

Covenantal politics is inclusive.

Second, *covenant life affirms the full humanity of every person*. In the biblical account of creation the earthling is made in the image of God. That assertion means that every human being is of the same value and has something to contribute. That fundamental claim undergirds democracy – that all have equal access to participation in the political process and equal access to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

When Sojourner Truth in 1851, she stood up for her full humanity:

“And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?” (Delivered 1851; Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio)

Democracy depends on seeing the worth of every person. That principle is under assault today. The rise of hate crimes against Jews and Muslims eats away at their full humanity. Immigrants and refugees are treated as

unworthy and their full humanity is implicitly questioned. More than 3 million people who have served their sentences cannot vote because of a felony on their record and their full humanity is not restored to them. This week the government proposed new rules that would deny the full humanity, *even the existence*, of more than one million people who identify as transgender.

Covenantal politics affirms the full humanity of every person.

Finally, *covenant life requires truth-telling*. In John's gospel Jesus says, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

The Declaration of Independence speaks of "truths" that are "self-evident." Democracy requires a shared understanding of the truth. Without it there is no trust and the democratic system cannot function without trust.

In 1788, Presbyterians in New York and Philadelphia, fresh from helping write the U.S. Constitution, sat down and wrote a set of Principles of Church Order. Among them was this phrase: "Truth is in order to goodness," meaning truth-telling leads to good behavior.

They went on to say, "No opinion can either be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level... We are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty." (F-3.0104 in PCUSA *Book of Order*)

Democracy depends on telling the truth, especially by those in power. That principle is under assault today. Conspiracy theories displace reality, facts become whatever is convenient in the moment, and lies masquerade as truth. When the truth goes missing, people suffer, and trust soon dissipates – and to live in covenant with one another trust is needed.

Covenantal politics requires truth-telling.

We are at a pivotal moment in our nation. Our democracy is fraying. Fear abounds. Violence simmers all around us and occasionally breaks through the surface. Trust has been depleted. Rhetoric works against the values and principles on which our democracy depends.

But we are a people rooted in history. We remember other times when the nation was threatened from within. And we overcame. “With malice toward none, with charity for all,” President Lincoln said in his Second Inaugural Address even as the Civil War continued to rage,

“Let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds...and...do all which may achieve...a just and lasting peace among ourselves.”

Those words express a *politics of biblical covenant*, where we are bound together and committed to the welfare of one another. If the nation could find its way back from the brink in that perilous and violent time, surely we can work our way out of the current predicament in which we find ourselves.

Democracy is a covenantal form of politics, and for it to be healthy requires participation. We need to do our part; we are responsible for one another. Voting is not merely a right; it's the duty and responsibility of citizens in a democratic nation. Peaceful political engagement expresses and embodies and brings to life the promise of democracy.

Let us not forget that we are people of faith, rooted in history, in covenant with God and with one another, carrying on the hope of generations before us, even as we stand ready to hand that hope on to those who follow us.

In the end, we can trust that God's grace and mercy, God's justice, and God's love will prevail, and we shall overcome.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer ~10:30 am Worship

Alanna Simone Tyler

Let us join our hearts and minds in prayer.

God Almighty, you have lovingly and faithfully kept covenant with your people through generations. You call us by name into relationship with you and reassure us that there is plenty good room in the family of God for all people.

You ask us to walk blameless before you and when we stray and stumble, still you are faithful. Thank you for your everlasting love.

We gather this morning with troubled hearts because a house of worship, the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, has been shattered by violence. We pray for the families of those who died, the wounded, the witnesses and all who are connected to this congregation. We pray for our sisters and brothers at Temple Israel. God make yourself known as the trustworthy Shepherd who protects, comforts and restores.

The violence directed at our Jewish family comes in a week when the news has been filled with stories of violence fueled by hatred in our country and around the world. Seeing and feeling the world's grief we are uncertain that we are moving toward peace. "Do not [allow us to] be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief." Give us the determination to pursue peace and understanding, love and friendship, justice and mercy. Give us the strength to dismantle systemic hatred brick by brick.

We pray for those in our midst who seek healing in mind, body and spirit for themselves or a loved one. Uphold all who are caregivers and show us how we can support the caregivers among us. Embrace all who are grieving so that they experience your loving presence.

On this Sunday when we mark the Protest Reformation...the Holy Spirit's ongoing reform of us as a church and as individuals/ God calls us to be transformed by the Word and Spirit.

We give you thanks for the blessing of new life and rejoice for the births of Erik Odland and twins Elsie Anne and Evelyn Marie Krohmer. We pray for the parents of these newborns and for parents around the world who are raising children.

Guide us, O God, by your Holy Spirit, that all of our prayers and all of our lives may serve your will and show your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord,"¹ who taught us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven...

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/service-lords-day/service-lords-day-people/>