

PERSPECTIVES

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, November 13, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're All Somewhere on a Bell Curve

By way of preface, let me say that the beginning of this sermon is the most boring part. So I would beg your indulgence to appreciate my predicament. Every group of people, congregations especially, can be represented by a bell curve on their views about virtually anything. You have those who are for any particular subject, those against, and a number of people in the middle.

You might have noticed that a lot of politics was in the news last week! In this church, some are on the right, some are on the left, and some are in the middle. There's a bell curve that can describe the theological, sociological, and political views, whatever they are, of this congregation.

However, the center of that curve in our church is likely to be to the left of where the curve is for the nation as a whole. Generally speaking, our members' views are more liberal than those of the whole nation. This is evidenced, for example, by the way in which we took a vote about six years ago to become an "open and affirming" church regarding gay rights. The vote was unanimous with not a single dissenting vote. That is hardly representative of the nation on that particular issue.

So also, there is a correlation between theological, sociological, and political views in our nation. There are people who hold deep liberal theology and conservative politics.

There are also people who hold the opposite views, but generally there is a correlation between those kinds of views.

Therefore, what can I say to all of you together as a congregation that is of any value this morning? That's my predicament.

Thus endeth the boring part. [A voice from the congregation mutters, "Thanks be to God." Art retorts, "Yes. Spoken like a true Episcopalian."]

I have four things that I'd like to talk about in this sermon: Part I, A Little Pastoral Advice; Part II, A Little Perspective; Part III, A Little Spiritual Discipline; and Part IV, A Little Parable of a Story.

PART I: A LITTLE PASTORAL ADVICE

For conservatives, those in this congregation who would consider themselves as such, I would ask you to realize that what happened last week was monumental. This might seem like silliness in your eyes, but it is not an exaggeration to place November 22nd, 1963, September 11th, 2001, and November 8th, 2016, together and of similar impact. For your average conservative, that notion is complete foolishness.

But for your average liberal, this is not so. That's the way last week's election feels. It was monumental for all of us. It was the kind

of election that twenty or thirty years from now we'll remember where we were on that date. For both liberals and conservatives, I would ask you to recall that our government has not been functioning well. I think virtually every soul would agree with that statement. It has not been functioning well for nearly a generation.

The Republican nominee, our President-elect, offered to shake it up for us. Despite his flaws, which both red and blue readily acknowledge, Donald Trump does have a singular potential ability to do it. Maybe he will succeed.

We Are Treading the Edge of a Precipice

Another bit of pastoral advice follows: This is a quote that was given to me this morning, and I'm thankful for it. It's from John Gardner, who goes back a whole generation, when he was Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare for President Lyndon Baines Johnson and founder of Common Cause. Please read this carefully:

“We are treading the edge of a precipice here. Civilizations die of disenchantment. If enough people doubt their society, the whole venture falls apart. We must never let anger, fashionable cynicism, or political partisanship blur our vision on that point. We must never despair of the Republic.”

That, my friends, is what we're playing with. It is a measure of despair. One statistic is that nationwide, there were well over a million write-in votes for Harambe, the gorilla that was shot in the Cincinnati Zoo on May 28. That is a measure of apathy and deep cynicism. That is a measure of despair in the electorate.

PART II: A LITTLE PERSPECTIVE

In seminary, I had to take a class on the history of Israel. I'm going to give you a crash summary of the major leaders involved in this course because it plays into what we've been feeling this week.

Four Major Biblical Leaders

First, you've got Abraham (c. 2128-1953 B.C.E.), first of the three patriarchs of Judaism, and Moses (c. 1527-1407 B.C.E.), the prophet; commanded by God to lead his people out of bondage into the Promised Land; given the Ten Commandments by God on Mount Sinai.

Then along comes David (King of Israel and Judah, c. 1010-970 B.C.E.), who killed Goliath, coveted Bathsheba, and was the father of Solomon. David united all the disparate tribes and made a kingdom out of them. Then Solomon (King of Israel, c. 1011-931 B.C.E) appears on the scene. He was the builder of the first temple in Jerusalem; revered for his wisdom; noted for his 700 wives and 300 concubines. He creates a bigger, more powerful kingdom, but then he dies.

Four Major Secular Kings

Next comes Sargon II (King of Assyria, 765-705 B.C.E., called Sargon the Great). He's way up in Syria, a couple hundred miles away. He's brutal and out to vanquish various populations. He comes down and conquers most of Israel but not all of it. Then he dies. Down to the southeast is Nebuchadnezzar (King of Babylon, c. 634-562 B.C.E.). He built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and destroyed the Jerusalem temple. He takes the kingdom of Babylon, goes up and captures Assyria, comes down and vanquishes Israel, and even makes adventures into Egypt, albeit

without success. Having scooped up a whole lot of country, he finally dies.

Then along comes Cyrus II (King of Persia, c. 600-530 B.C.E., called Cyrus the Great). He's way out in Persia, but he's more powerful than all of his predecessors combined. He comes through and takes Assyria, Babylon, Israel, Egypt, and even goes up into Greece. What a powerful guy, except he too then dies. Then Alexander III the Great (King of Macedonia, 356-323 B.C.E.) makes his appearance. He united Greece and is known for his conquest of the Persian empire, stretching from Albania to eastern Pakistan. He conquers all of that, but he dies young at age 32.

Finally comes the Roman empire, beginning with the first emperor, Augustus Caesar in 31 B.C.E, and ending with the last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, with his capitulation to the Gothic King Odacer in 476 C.E., a span of 507 years. This was approximately 1,229 years since the founding of Rome by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus in 753 B.C.E. In those years, the Roman Empire captured vast territories all around the Mediterranean Sea and far into Europe and western Asia. Finally the empire fell due to rot on the inside.

The Rise and Fall of Nations, Map by Map

If you go online, which I do way too often, you can find maps that will show you map-by-map the rise and fall of powerful nations. For example, take a vast region like the East. Therein lie China, Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, Tibet, and all those places. Successive maps will show you the East, and you can watch the dominant nations rise and fall and rise and fall as time goes by and as maps change. Sometimes they'll start around 600 or so B.C., and they can be traced

through to the 21st Century in maybe 90 seconds or so.

Pull up another series of maps, and they'll do the same thing for the Middle East. Pull up yet another succession of maps, and they'll do the same thing for Europe. Kingdoms rise and fall. What I'm offering you is a perspective from a broader time frame, rather than what happens in four years or the next election cycle. The perspective can bring peace into your soul.

Weather Patterns: Perspective from Space

Another perspective comes from the point of view of space. What I would like to show you is a marvelous app I have on my phone that shows the earth in the blackness of a starry sky, and the weather patterns on earth are in real time. And you can take your finger and very gently start the earth spinning.

You could watch that app for a whole minute of your time by simply looking at the earth from about the perspective of the moon, watching it spin gently, beautifully into space. These broader perspectives can help calm the soul.

PART III: A LITTLE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

The third part of what I want to talk about this morning has to do with a form of Spiritual Discipline in Tibetan Buddhism. This particular discipline is used to train novice monks in the monastery.

What happens is that a wise old monk and a novice monk sit down together and discuss one of the teachings of the Buddha. Just one. And they begin to talk about it in a very disciplined way. The two of them are surrounded by the other monks, who are just

listening, watching. What they do is to go down the same road with the elder and the novitiate, but only in their own minds. They do not participate in the two-way discussion.

Ferretting out Minus & Plus Consequences

The point of the discussion between the two is to ferret out *all* of the *negative* consequences that exist in following this particular teaching of the Buddha. Name every blessed one of them. It takes hours. Sometimes it takes a day to think through every single negative consequence of following a given teaching.

And then when they're done, when the novice is exhausted, the two principals switch subjects. Now what are the positive consequences? What are *all* of the *positive* consequences of following that same teaching? The net result is generally about a day-and-a-half per teaching, and there are hundreds of teachings.

The consequence of this exercise is that the novice then follows the teaching not because somebody told him to. It has nothing to do with any external authority whatsoever. "The Buddha said it; therefore, I must do it." No! "My teacher said it; therefore, I must do it." No! "It's the law; therefore, I must do it." No! The motivation to follow the teaching is entirely internal because the novitiate has done his exhaustive exercise, because he has driven it through his mind with intensive mental labor.

Our Theology Falls Short of Christ's Will

*Excerpted from a book entitled *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*. The author is Richard Rohr, a global leader in spiritual awakening. He is a Franciscan monk who is a revered speaker

In our country, we have not been anywhere nearly so disciplined about Christ's teachings. Let me give you an example. Forgive me if I seem offensive about this. I don't mean to be. One of the teachings of the Christ is that, if somebody hits you in the face, turn the other cheek. And we have not thought through what we think about whether or not that is a good thing.

We have a military force as big as the rest of the world's militaries combined. At the military level, we are not interested in turning the other cheek. Likewise, we have a penal system that is the largest in the world.

We don't know what we think about Christ's teaching. We don't know whether it's true or not. We don't know whether we should obey it or not. It has never been internalized for us. We call ourselves a Christian nation. We venerate Christ. What would Jesus do? And then we've got this disconnect between the way in which we act as a people and what we say we believe because we've not done such exhaustive exercises. Not half of it. We've not driven it through in our minds with intensive mental labor. Not half of it,

Tibetan Buddhist Spiritual Training

The following paragraph is a fragmentary description of Tibetan Buddhist spiritual training discipline.*

"It appears to be patient and disciplined training in nonpolarity thinking and in broader reflection and discrimination. There is no declaration of the perfect answer or the wrong answer. The novice is simply

and a famed writer, among whose many books is *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*. Rohr is also the founder of The Center for Action and Contemplation.

being taught how to weigh and discern, see and understand the good and the bad consequences — and from that open field, to learn himself and learn how to wisely advise others. What an utterly different structure compared with a Western debate style! With us, one must win, and the other must lose. (This is our style of religion too.)”

Winners and losers. Those who are right, and those who are wrong. Those destined for heaven, and those destined for hell.

See the endnote on the last page of this sermon.

PART IV: A LITTLE PARABLE OF A STORY

I asked permission of Lee Stradley to use this story of his. This is what happened to him earlier this week, and I would like to offer it to you as a parable.

Lee is riding his bicycle for exercise when two dogs come charging out from the lawn of a nearby house and begin chasing him, barking fiercely.

One of the dogs, while frantically chasing the bike in the road, is badly hit by a car and goes down. So Lee gets off his bicycle, picks up the dog and carries it to the house where the dogs came from. Walking up to the front door, he sees a curtain move, so Lee knows a person saw him coming but would not answer the door.

Cradling an Injured Dog unto Death

Now what do you do? The owner of the dog wouldn't even open the door, and the driver is long gone. So Lee cradles the dog and sits down on a doorstep. He begins to weep as he holds the dog as it slips into unconsciousness. Then it dies in his arms.

I offer this story to you as a parable for our nation, for the way in which we are a people. We have those who are hit-and-run types, those who are too afraid to answer the door, or those who have unknown reasons not to offer aid to an injured creature. But the person in this crisis wouldn't even answer the door when his or her own pet just got hit by a car and is being held by a stranger. And then we've got people like Lee, who cradles the dog and comforts it until it dies.

Now those of you who know Lee, know also that he is a sensitive guy. What he did to comfort a dying creature is the kind of thing he would do.

However, I would like to say to you as strongly as I know how is that being a sensitive person has nothing to do with it. Instead, it was the human thing to do; it was the right and moral thing to do. It was the loving thing to do rather than the example of the driver and the person in the house.

We have a story that can lead us to who we are as compassionate, kind, just, loving, peaceful people that we have the ability to be, deep inside.

Lee, bless you, thank you.

Amen.

An Endnote Concerning the 14th Dalai Lama, Leader of the Buddhists.

Once asked about his religion, he responded, “My religion is kindness.”

A few of the Dalai Lama's trenchant maxims:

A Buddhist monk has a responsibility first and foremost to themselves, and that's to find the truth each day in every part of their life.

When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.

I believe deeply that we must find, all of us together, a new spirituality. This new concept ought to be elaborated alongside the religions in such a way that all people of good will could adhere to it.

Don't try to use what you learn from Buddhism, use it to be a better whatever than you already are.

Firstly, as a Buddhist monk, I hold that violence is not good. Secondly, I am a firm believer in the Gandian ethic of passive resistance. And thirdly, in reality, violence is not our strength.

This is my simple religion. there is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple. The philosophy is kindness.

We can never obtain peace in the outer world until we make peace with ourselves.

If you have no compassion for yourself, then you are not capable of developing compassion for others.

Tragedy should be used as a source of strength.

Change only takes place through action, not through meditation and prayer alone.