



## Freedom, Peace and Bread

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2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Isaiah 65:17-25

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In the early morning hours of last Wednesday, like so many of you, I sat in stunned disbelief as one firewall after another fell and reality began to set in. He won. This is our country. For most of the time since then, I have been unable to move beyond that one simple, devastating fact. I am sure there will be lots of analysis of all of this for years, and I pray that we, as a nation, discern the right lessons from it. But I could not get there. He won. This is our country. Followed by another reality: that sermon I had prepared for today? Not gonna happen. Time for a rewrite. But what to say?

In the days since the election, there has been no shortage of recriminations and emotions. There have been calls for unity, and the usual smattering of hopeful people, seeking to avoid pain in their own way by offering clichéd maxims intended to lift spirits. For some, shock quickly turned to anger at the reality that America has just elected a man who spent the last year and a half insulting and excluding them, and the result has been days of demonstrations and the proliferation of #not my president. Sadly, there are also plenty of stories about hatred and bullying on the rise by racist, misogynistic homophobes who believe their side “won.” But most people seem to fall between those who are hopeful that change will finally come to Washington and those who remain stuck in fear, despair and pain. He won. This is our country.

I think what makes it even harder is that all of the people and institutions we trust to prevent this from happening failed us. Statesmen and women from both parties, Supreme Court justices, every living president, and many of our most revered military and diplomatic leaders warned the nation. Only two major newspapers and the KKK endorsed him. Every poll indicated that his ascension was not possible. The markets warned against what his victory could mean. None of it mattered. The firewalls fell. I imagine every American Muslim, every person ever insulted or excluded for the color of their skin, who they love, the gender they represent, or the values they cling to, feels that the institutions they counted on have betrayed them and they do not have a friend in the world. Apparently, many of the people who now feel vindicated gave up on all of those institutions a long time ago, because all of those warnings clearly had no effect on their decision as to how to cast their vote.

The Germans gave to the world a phrase that fits that feeling when their country lay in ashes, they were starving and had run out of hope and answers, and they did not have a friend in the world at the end of the Second World War. *Stunde Null*. Zero Hour. I believed that—in the end—values that I believed stood at the heart of our nation would win out. But those who shared my beliefs were not able to overcome the feelings of abandonment and fear on the side of those who were tired of what they saw as the “status quo.” And we are left to wonder: how we could have possibly arrived at this place and where do we, as the church, go next?

In Germany, that next step came from an unlikely source. In the midst of all that devastation, in

all of the hopelessness, torn by the shame and grief that comes from total defeat, out of the ashes could be heard steadily reverberating calls that echoed through the rubble of Dresden and Berlin, Stettin and Leipzig... "Freiheit...Frieden...Brot..." Freedom...Peace...Bread... While all the world reviled them in their misery...in the aftermath of all the twisted loyalties, the misguided dreams, the broken promises...there was *only one group* that cared enough to meet them in their devastation: no, not the church or the Allies or any even the returning elites of German society. It was German Communists, trained for just this moment: to re-enter a broken world with the only thing that truly mattered at that moment, the freedom, peace, and bread needed to sustain a broken people. Everyone else lived in a world of winners and losers, of good guys and bad, of being on the wrong side or the right side.

I wanted...oh, how I wanted for the fear and hatred spewed by Donald Trump to get crushed in this election. For love and inclusion to win and to triumph, once and for all, over messages that divide and objectify people. I wanted my side to win. But who won? It's not like the Republicans won—many of their leaders rejected or distanced themselves from Trump long ago. If Hillary had somehow eked out a win, I am not sure it would have been a Democratic victory. She surely would have had to deal with the reality that a huge swath of the American people would have felt at least as disillusioned and abandoned. It certainly was not a vindication of the alt right or the KKK, because I refuse to believe that sixty million people voted for Trump primarily because they are racist or misogynist or homophobic, but more likely due to some variation of the theme of freedom, peace and bread.

Something the early church taught us long ago that many Christians seem to have forgotten in our polarized world, is that there are different levels of engagement in our collective witness. Many of the values that they held close as a community of believers—Jewish faith and dietary practices, the equal treatment of women and slaves, worship of God and not the emperor—were spiritual disciplines that marked the community of faith even while they engaged the world with a simple message of freedom, peace, and bread. In a world that too quickly creates idols and scapegoats, early Christians saw that our most basic calling is to listen to people where they are hurting, respond to elemental needs, and welcome others with love.

Because somewhere beyond what many of us would like to reduce to a triumph of hate and ignorance is a person whose heart beats just like ours, who loves their family and is worried about their future, who believes in America enough to stand in a line and cast a vote. Or, as Elizabeth Warren said this week, we have a right to speak out, but we also have an obligation to listen. And it starts with freedom, peace, and bread—a common need that affects us all.

Now, in saying that, it's not that I don't understand that we have a responsibility to call out discrimination or injustice in all its forms. We just have to do so in ways that resist categorizing, demonizing, and labeling any group of people in order to elevate the legitimate concerns of others, like all of life is some Darwinian power struggle. And while I am not naïve enough to think that the church is some fortress that keeps out all worldly influences, we are also called to witness to a community that breaks down barriers and resists the subtle idolatry that creates scapegoats.

Because as devastatingly fragmented and polarized as our society may appear today, Paul's church unfortunately shows that such divisions are as evident in congregations as in society itself. How people manage to get along and serve our calling is a challenge that creates tension among the faithful as much as the nation. Recognizing that fact is the first step to how the church can be a positive force in moving forward out of our present Stunde Null.

Because, in the end, whether you believe that you are carrying the weight of the nation while there is a huge class of freeloaders who just want to get government handouts or you feel that you have been excluded and left behind by a rigged system that favors wealthy insiders, Paul declares that our next step should be simply to get to work, contributing to the health and well-being of the community by listening to the needs of those who, for whatever reason, believe that their sustenance, security, and ability to pursue their calling has been threatened. In other words, to seek the welfare of our neighbor is to listen and respond with freedom, peace, and bread.

To fail to understand this, for Paul, is not simply to create unhealthy systems. It is a problem that is deeply spiritual. In a world where many don't want to be bothered with anything beyond what they want, when they want it, and how they are able to control it, the church that functions best is a place that creates space for the discernment of God's call and the participation of God's faithful in the sharing of our gifts. It's about letting go and letting God. Becoming spiritually mature means relinquishing our need to build some personal church-cocoon that keeps our world safe, secure, and free from outside influences and crushes anything that threatens that world.

All of us, from time to time, slide into the temptation of waiting for a pastor or group or some political savior to make us feel good about life. But when Paul says, "if you will not work, you cannot eat," he is talking about more than a sandwich. To truly experience the living, transforming God in our lives, we must live the Christian life, not wait for it to come to us. Only by taking the time to study, pray, listen to others, and engage in mission and fellowship, will we be fed. No one else can do that for you. Without it, you will not grow and you will not mature.

Paul calls those who live in a binary world of winners and losers, of spiritual warriors and decadent deplorables by a simple name: "busybodies." Those so sure of their righteousness that they fail to see how their frenzied activity cuts other people out and turns them off. All of their busy-ness is not empowering, it's suffocating. They believe they are the only ones who can make church and society function, but the truth is that they are just as disruptive to the life of the community as those unwilling to do their share. They sow seeds of resentment and distrust. They shame us in the eyes of the world.

There is another way. We can hear the voices of those who spoke loudly last Tuesday of their fear and sense of abandonment, while fighting for a place for those who continue to live with oppression and exclusion. We can speak against hatred while listening without judgment to real pain, loss, and insecurity. We can witness to a nation torn apart with the freedom of God's love, the peace that only hope brings, and the bread of life. And that work starts now. Amen.