

"I'll Take Two!"

II Kings 2:1 – 14

A Sermon by Rod Kennedy

Sunday, June 26, 2022

Down in Georgia, the Wares Ferry Road Baptist Church sign, a cross at its top and to its side, had a clear message: "GOD DETESTS PRIDE." The pastor insisted the message was not intentional.

Wesley Whitworth is the pastor of Wares Ferry Road Baptist Church. He claimed that the sign was not meant to target those in the LGBTQ community. The man who changes the sign, Whitworth said, was referencing "personal pride — pride and arrogance, things of that nature."

"And it just coincided with Pride Month," Whitworth said.

The pastor says, "I would, of course, make it clear, obviously, that our personal convictions are that this is not just an alternate lifestyle, it's a sin like any other," he said. "But they would be welcome to attend services and participate with us in hopes that they'd be converted to Christianity."

Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas, in a concurring *Roe vs. Wade* opinion, says that rights to birth control and same-sex marriage should also be overruled. In addition, he says that sodomy laws should be reinstated. The only case he left out was the case that made interracial marriage legal. One of the honorable senators from Texas tweeted that it was time to undo *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. He later put a different spin on his words. In case we didn't already know, this is a declaration of war on the progress we have made in this country in human rights, women's rights, and gay rights in the last 50 years. But I venture to guess that inflation will be more important to people than abortion in the next election. Money matters more than women in our culture of greed. As the price of everything rises, there's an old baseball cry heard across the land, "Say it ain't so Joe!" We should have some spiritual discomfort with our addiction to money since Jesus warned us that it can not save, but we are a money-dominated culture.

In the story of Elisha, the prophet raises a famine, the price of food rises so high, the widows can't afford to buy food. The widows ask the king to help. The king says, "I'm doing everything I can." "Let the Lord help you," says the king. "How can I help you?" The king, the political system, is helpless. The king cannot manufacture food. The king is powerless. Elisha responds to the famine. Only God can save. But I'm not confident that most Americans still believe in God like that.

The idea of God hating people collides with biblical reality and human experience. Sara Ahmed, in her book, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, has taught me that cruel words not only hurt others, but they stick to bodies. She argues that hate sticks figures of hate together – “those gays.” She shows how the disgust of anti-gay Christians works to produce the “disgusting” as the bodies which must be ejected from the community. Her model of disgust is “stickiness” – the pain, the hurt, the meanness sticks to the bodies of those who are castigated, demeaned, and rejected. No matter how liberated they may become later, the residual stickiness is still there clinging to their bodies as if applied by Gorilla Glue.

Guess what? The stickiness of hate slides off God because God is generous, gracious, kind, loving, merciful, caring, compassionate, and long-suffering. God is love. God doesn't hate.

I looked up the times in the Bible when God's name is associated with hate: Proverbs says God hate haughty eyes, lying tongues, hands that shed innocent blood, wicked plans, feet that hurry to do evil, lying witnesses who give false testimony and those who sow discord in a family. And the psalmist says that God hates violence (11:5). Whether you are an anti-abortionist wanting to bomb an abortion clinic, or a pro-choice group wanting to set fire to an anti-abortion center, that is violence and God is not on your side no matter how much godly indignation you work up to convince yourself. “God hates the lover of violence.” I pray we will put this verse on our minds and in our hearts in the weeks ahead because violence is not the way to respond to the ruling of the Supreme Court on abortion.

For as long as I can remember, the evangelical army in the United States has been pushing and pushing to make this nation what they call “more moral.” They have now made abortion illegal, but there are no rules or laws for men. It's as if men have no role in pregnancy, no responsibility. Never lose sight of the reality that the evangelical world is ruled by men, dominated by men. Never forget that the churches pushing against abortion have huge sexual scandals and sexual misbehavior among their male clergy.

Overturing Roe vs. Wade is the Battle of Bull Run in the minds of the Zealots for controlling the sexual habits of all citizens. The problem for progressives is that we are not all that worked up about any of these issues. I am not confident that we really understand the meaning and power of “zeal.” Zeal is associated with burning. Zealous religious people are the pyromaniacs of moral issues. The root word for zeal means “hot under the collar.” It comes from a word that means “dyed dark red.” Well, the New Zealots of our time have been baptized in the fires of burning zeal. Like

Johnny Cash they have fallen into "a ring of fire and it burns, burns, burns, the ring of fire." The word connotes the color of the face when one is enraged.

Part of the issue is that we are not at all comfortable with zeal. We are sure that there is such a thing as positive zeal. It smacks of emotion, and we suspect that emotion is somehow wrong. Mainline church people don't do that sort of thing. We believe in telling people the facts and believing they will accept what we tell them. We are, after all, in our minds, rational people. Getting emotional is something we leave to the evangelicals. Somehow, we missed the lessons where St. Paul taught us to maintain our spiritual zeal.

Borrowing from George Lakoff's critique of progressives, if we believe that we shouldn't be emotional, fired up, consumed by zeal, we will look and act wimpy. We will lack the discipline to stay connected to the church and to our causes. We will think that religion is a personal, private matter and that everyone should be allowed to make up their own minds without any persuasion from us. We pretty much keep our faith to ourselves. And in doing this we have missed what is happening in our world. We will think that any old set of beliefs will suffice or that no beliefs at all are needed. We will be unmoved by matters of the spirit, untouched by the call of religious commitment, and not that interested in the church. We will think that we don't need any appeal to emotion, and we will be wrong. We will think that we don't need to speak of values, because everybody's got values, and no one set of values are better than any other set. If this is how we think, we will be dead wrong. Lakoff puts it best: "You will not be stating your deepest values, [but you will be] suppressing legitimate emotions, disparaging the other side as dumb or backward and unworthy of debate, and you will be cowering in fear" that someone might mistake you as a religious fanatic. You will be ineffective."

The idea of getting emotional is a very uncomfortable demand for us. If some people in churches like ours don't develop some real passion, there's not going to any stopping the advance of the New Zealots – those Christians marching as to war. We will never grasp what we are up against until we realize that the New Zealots – the conservative evangelicals – never surrender, never admit defeat. They turn what they consider persecution into a "chip on the shoulder." They turn being shamed by civic virtue for homophobia and racism into outrage. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Doron Taussig offer a survey assessment of Trump's *rhetorical signature*, which includes not only specific words and phrases but themes, motifs, and stylistic

maneuvers. This rhetorical signature—including elements of demonization, evidence-flouting, and repudiation of institutions—“aided his cause as a candidate because it signaled a rejection of both the status quo and political convention to a constituency eager to see those things shaken up.”²⁵ Robert Ivie has similarly focused on *demolition* as the “guiding trope of Trump’s apocalyptic rhetoric.”²⁶ Ivie’s conviction is that a baseline of legitimate economic grievances caused by neoliberalism set the stage for Trump by inflaming “a collective fantasy that he will get things done by shaking up politics as usual.”²⁷ Although they do not name it as such, these scholars align Trump’s rhetorical idiom with the evocation of rage. Joshua Gunn has also worked out a theory of how Trump’s rhetoric marshals affects, but along a different axis—he emphasizes what he calls Trump’s *political perversion*. Gunn starts from psychoanalysis, and particularly Jacques Lacan’s typology of *psychotic*, *neurotic*, and *perverse* psychic formations—all of which are present in all of us in varying degrees. Gunn recasts these as rhetorical genres, and suggests that Trump’s *perversion*—his contagious obsession with flouting conventions and transgressing taboos—is the motor that drives his rhetorical success.²⁸

Two book-length studies of Trump and affect from Communications scholars have also been published. Lawrence Grossberg’s *Under the Cover of Chaos* is a sprawling, multidimensional exploration of Trump’s relationships with predecessor movements in American conservatism.²⁹ Like Ivie and Gunn, Grossberg suggests that Trump has managed to pleasurize disruption. “The most obvious and pervasive feature of Trump’s highly visible and almost entertaining ... if also terrifying performance,” he writes, “is the normalization of a frenetic chaos and hyper-activism.”³⁰ Whereas Gunn draws his points from psychoanalysis, Grossberg suggests that it is the reveling in motion, spontaneity, and the Deleuzian concept of *becoming* that consolidates Trump’s command of his political constituencies. However, this is only the main axle of this wide-ranging book, which ends up also speculating on the importance of shame, anxiety, narcissism, and alienation for mapping Trump’s appeal to his followers.³¹

The most focused study of Trump, affect, and communication to date comes in Ott and Dickinson’s *The Twitter Presidency*, which expressly argues that the aesthetic dimensions of Trump’s style are designed to resonate with what they refer to as *white rage*.³² They locate white rage in “the fear and anxiety surrounding the social decentering of white privilege and hegemonic masculinity.”³³ Trump, they propose, is effective as a communicator precisely by virtue of his ability to ignite this latent fund of frustration. They further suggest that Twitter is a uniquely effective tool for Trump by virtue

of its medium-specific affordances in favor of simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility.³⁴ These features allow Trump to match the rhythm of white rage and seize control of it.

Progressives will need to find creative ways to incorporate pathos (emotion/affect) into the messages that attempt to counter the rage of the New Zealots. We are going to have to show some emotion, develop some zeal, some passion for the future. Empathy, in my book, is the best place to start. Empathy for all human beings rather than cruelty.

In the Bible there's a story that can speak to progressives. Elisha, a prophet-in-training, is about to see his master, Elijah, leave the earth in a chariot of fire. He is smart enough to say, "I want a double portion."

There's nothing rational or explainable in this story. Elijah is standing there at the Jordan and then he disappears. This is an open-ended story. Elijah doesn't really leave us. He does not die. Elijah is somehow still available. Now, you can shut this down by simply refusing to believe the story, but that's not the point. What we need to see is that the life of Elijah "remains open to possibility. Religious people are always looking for the return of Elijah. Some people thought Jesus was a returning Elijah. The story of the transfiguration has Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus about his exodus. Jews today expect Elijah to reappear at the Passover Table. Go to the door and see if Elijah is there.

Open those old Sunday school files and remember what you know about Elijah. Elijah makes abundance available for the needy. A widow with one last meal and Elijah gives us a jar of meal that never runs out. Elisha remembers that moment and he says, "Give me a double portion of that." Elijah makes life out of death. Elisha says, "Give me some of that." Elijah routs all the prophets of Baal in a super bowl-like contest as he brings down fire from heaven.

Progressives have all the gifts and resources necessary to offer the nation a different vision, a different morality, and a different ethics than the old, controlling, demeaning zeal of the conservative mindset.

As soon as Elisha took the mantle of Elijah, he went toward the Jordan River. When he struck the water, the water parted, and Elisha went over. That's memory of Exodus. Elisha now inherits the spirit of Moses and Elijah. That's the double portion.