

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Gospel Reading: John 6:24-35

19 August 2018



I was reading this week about a recent US President who had the practice of reading letters that were sent to him each day from across the country. Not all of them, just ten, often handwritten notes, from the 10,000 or so letters and messages the President receives every day. 10,000 voices articulated in written word of people from across this land far and wide offered to a single reader. From many, one.

Apparently, this particular President liked to read just a sampling of ten a day out of so many because he wanted to get a feel, first-hand, for what people were thinking and experiencing in the country he served. With all of the cacophony that accompanies public office, there was something inherently valuable in trying to listen, even just a little. Staff also took that input and created a daily word cloud, distributed around the White House so that the administration could get a glimpse into the struggles and hopes that the people around them held dear. An imperfect listening tool, to be sure, but an attempt to lean just a little bit closer in an age when listening is a rare and endangered art.

Over these past two weeks here at All Saints', we have attempted to navigate as a community some of our own strong passions and disappointments, our frustrations and feelings of hurt. Included in that has been the experience of not being heard that a number of you have articulated following my cancellation of our voter registration training and drive a fortnight ago. The feelings and reflections that you have expressed to me have been right, and heartfelt, and justified, and true. A 'word cloud' of our own has emerged, and ballooned, and helped us see what others are seeing and feeling and knowing.

We have talked a lot these past two weeks. I have learned a lot. Strong cases have been made, on all sides, and difficult compromises have been reached. Your vestry has struggled with one another and with the swirl of questions and sentiments it has tried its level best to take on board, and we have arrived at something like common ground for us to walk upon together, such that we might find a way forward to be one body. In the process, I have discovered some home truths.

First off, not everyone's a Solomon - especially me - able to discern, like a gift from God, what is right. I have learned that I need to listen more and longer, and talk less; that I need to ask more questions and offer fewer answers. To you, Kim, and to all those who had planned and hoped to be part of the originally scheduled voter registration work, with whom I should have communicated much better than I did, I am sorry, and I ask for your forgiveness.

That is what I could and should have seen. What I have also discovered is some of what I could not see until it was shared. Just how thoroughly voter registration not only runs through complex layers of history in this part of the world, but how those layers of history and present day struggles live in people's hearts, I see now in ways I had not seen before, because of what you have shared with me and with others here at All Saints'. Sometimes we don't know what we don't know until we are taught it.

All Saints' Episcopal Church

634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796

www.allsaintsatlanta.org

I also recognize that there is much more, deeply rooted under the surface, that I simply cannot see as yet, in the lived intersection of race and poverty and the political evolution of the State of Georgia and of America's south, not merely in how that history might be told by a multitude of witnesses, but far more, in how it has been lived and still is lived, and felt, and known in the heart. I want to learn, and as much as you know these things for yourself, I ask you to teach me.

Yet, as well as all of this, there has been more. I think it is safe to say that something has been happening to us on this block that has been happening to churches and synagogues, to parent teacher associations and all manner of work places across this country, not for a short while but for a generation. You and I don't just live in a time that is divisive in general, but, according to a Pew Forum report published in October of last year, we have lived through a quarter century of a specific kind of growing fracture. The Pew study found that over the past 25 years, the division of views on political issues in America has remained fairly constant along lines of race, religion, education, age, and gender, yet that same division when measured by political party affiliation has more than doubled in a melting pot or salad bowl that it promises to be through all sorts of lenses, but paint us in colors of blue and red, and we are further apart from one another than we have been in a generation.

Yet, it is not merely the fact that party affiliation has been the identifying factor that has driven a wedge between people, it is how that divide gets expressed in society around us that is most pressing for us as a community of faith. As a New York Times article argued this week, one of the ways that the divide manifests is in the form of anger, sometimes communicated in person, but most often via the relative anonymity we can discover online. Such anger has resulted in families splitting, married couples rendered unable to talk about politics with one another any more, and random strangers wanton to behaving badly toward one another because our capacity for dialogue has been reduced to the lowest common denominator of 280 characters or less, and has been profoundly undermined by a strident belief that there is no truth more righteous than the one 'I', the individual, hold to be true.

In other words, we are not so much living in a post-factual or post-truth age, when it comes especially to party political difference, we are living increasingly in a post-dialogue age, and it is my belief that this trend in our shared national life, expressed not in Washington or on our news feeds but through our own individual lives, is undermining who we are and our capacity not only to listen but to build the bridges between people any vibrant civic society not only needs but thrives upon. We need to hear one another and seek to understand one another, lest the only wisdom we are exposed to in the world become the echo of our own voices.

What has struck me so profoundly this past year of serving All Saints' is how fundamentally you are a parish that loves this church with a deep and abiding passion. I have never known a community of people who love a church quite how you love this one. Your commitment to our mission and ministries and your willingness to express what it means to be Christ's hands and feet in the world is something I have never seen before. It is a profound strength and should be for generations to come. Yet, I wonder if sometimes in life, whether our deep love for a community as we experience it as individuals, can make it hard for us to see how others among us might be experiencing it for themselves.

We are not immune from the lines of fracture that have been spreading and deepening in America for this past generation or more. Of course, you know that. You're a smart and savvy bunch of folks, but I wonder how much we as a community have chosen to step into the space of our political difference. It is my belief that people around us are desperate for spaces in their lives where difference can be welcomed and known. People around us are

All Saints' Episcopal Church

634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796

www.allsaintsatlanta.org

desperate for communities like this one, and in all candor, what I had failed to see until a couple of weeks ago, was how much good there is still for me and for us to do in seeking to build bridges of mutual understanding between members of our own parish community, in order for us not merely to better know and understand one another, but in order for us to fulfill what the Prayer Book teaches us is the church's mission, 'to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ'. We must be a church that strives for justice and peace among all people, to uphold and struggle for the dignity of every human being; yet I firmly believe that we will only be able to work for right relationships between people as the church, when we commit to doing that work within and between ourselves.

When I first learned about this wonderful parish, I discovered two fundamental truths about who All Saints' has been in the life of this city. I learned that this is a church that struggled for desegregation and for civil rights, for all God's people. I learned that this is a church that found space and compassion in a time of fear and separation during the AIDS crisis. I learned that this is a church that stepped forward into years-long dialogue over marriage equality, ultimately proclaiming in word and deed that no matter who a person loves or how God has made them, all are welcome at this table. It was and remains a story of courage and fortitude, not fashioned in a moment, but over years of life together.

And, I also learned that this is a church of all sorts. That this is a community where it didn't matter where you lived, or what you believed, or what you did for a living, or how you voted. Many of you have told me that you drive past several other churches to come to this one, because this is a space that prides itself for its inclusion and its embrace of difference, a community that gets you out of your comfort zone and into a shared space of communion. In short, I have learned that this church is not an either/or, not a social justice church or an all sorts church, but that this is a both/and kind of community.

And so in all of this, as much as the hard conversations that have been shared over this past fortnight have been about profound questions of politics and justice in our world today, for me, they have also been about what it means for us to be the Church, and the nature of the community of faith you and I share that holds out for us not merely the possibility that difference might be cherished, but that we might be changed.

The Body of Christ meets around an abundant table with room for all, a community where we are not only met in one another but transformed moment by moment into the full and flourishing human life that God calls each of us to become. We are called to step into society, discerning to be and do what we believe to be right, deeply valuing that we do so as a diverse community of faith, including all the sorts of our political diversity.

I believe that very many of you love this church precisely because we are both, a church where difference thrives, and a church that isn't afraid to step forward and be counted within the struggles of our day and time. It is with that conviction that I wish to invite you now to become more of who you already are. This is not an invitation to move toward a political center where no one dare say anything in fear of offending someone else, but a relational center, a space for communion, where, as Paul urges, we are so much more than Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free, but a new creation. What newness might be created in our midst if we might find ways to draw nearer to one another, not further apart? How might you be enriched by learning what lights the fires and stirs the hearts of the people sitting next to you right now?

You and I are made to be beings in communion, made one by the God who made and loves us all. Draw near, with faith, receive the body of Christ in the life of the people right here in your midst, such that you and I might be primed to recognize the glory of God present and at work in the life of the world all around us. Take this bread, drink this cup; behold who you are, in the face of one another; become what you receive. Amen.

All Saints' Episcopal Church

634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796

www.allsaintsatlanta.org