

*The Spirituality of Resistance*

And an excerpt from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*

On Tuesday night, while watching election returns, I was also keeping an eye on my Facebook feed. As the results became more and more ominous, posts from friends and colleagues became more and more desolate. The one that hit me the hardest, because it put into words exactly what I was feeling, was from a colleague in New York City. Pastor Heidi Neumark, who you may know from her books and other writing (also that she was Heather Hargraves' pastor when she lived in NY) wrote, "I feel like I did watching the towers come down, sitting there watching a disaster of devastating proportions and not being able to do a thing about it."

I had already been thinking that this felt like 9/11. In some ways, it's worse. Knowing that almost half the people of my country abandoned the values that I hold near and dear as an American is a devastating blow. On 9/11/2001, we came together in our grief (of course, that would be turned later into an excuse for war), but for a time, we were united in mourning the loss of life that day. But on 11/8/2016, our disunity - already pronounced - erupted into gaping wounds that no one knows (or maybe wants to know) how to heal.

This past week has been difficult, to put it mildly. We've been like walking wounded. On Wednesday, I was depressed. By Thursday, I was angry and just generally grouchy about everything. Although I did remark several times that I'm glad I live here in the Bay Area, where it's safe to commiserate with one another. I've been offering support to my cousin back in an ultra-conservative part of PA. Yet even here there have been reports of violence and harassment. As *The SF Chronicle* headline read: "Election ruptures civility here in America's bastion of inclusivity."

And now it's Sunday. We've come together to grieve and to try to see a way forward. I'm still processing all of this myself, so I'm not going to insult you with pious admonitions to just have faith and all will be well. Though that may ultimately be true, there's more to it than simply sitting back, hoping and expecting that God will take care of it.

As I said, by Thursday I was experiencing a chaotic mix of emotions, as I expect you were too - swinging all the way from wanting to withdraw from anything to do with politics to being ready to join the protest lines, from sitting quietly with my grief to feeling the urge to get out there and do something. Mostly though I was just grouchy about everything. By that evening, I hadn't accomplished everything I needed to do for the week, which made me even more grouchy. I was tempted to skip my meditation group scheduled for that night, but I also knew that it was probably what I should do. So I went. Thank goodness.

If you've seen the announcement in *Keeping in Touch* for Sufi heart-based meditation, that is what I do. While it's a Sufi practice, it's totally compatible with our own tradition. We don't have time here to go into in more detail, but you're always welcome to ask me about it. My point is, that as we seek a way forward with appropriate action, our decisions must come from the heart, from the center of our being where the Ground of our Being resides. While going into meditation or silence or any other spiritual practice might appear to be withdrawal *from* the world, it is not. It is preparation for engagement *with* the world.

I entered meditation Thursday evening wondering how I could tame the chaos. I left with a sense of calm I hadn't felt since before Tuesday. And I was reminded again that our peace comes from within and our spiritual practice will sustain us. Now being here together is a spiritual practice, but this is just one hour a week. I encourage you (if you don't have one already) to seek out a practice that will sustain you for all the hours of the week. It doesn't have to be meditation; it could be music or art or any number of things. I'm always happy to talk with you more about that too. I'm sharing my feelings and experience of this week, not as an example of piety, but because I am firmly convinced that it is from that spiritual center that we will be able to work through our grief as well as work for justice and peace.

Balance is a word that has been coming to mind a lot this week: balancing the call to go more deeply into the heart of my being in order to connect with the Divine with the call to immediate action in the face of threats to members of our community. This is the balance we need to find.

The grief over our fractured nation is so profound; it cannot nor should not be rushed through or glossed over, as painful as it is. It's like a death. To speak now of healing is premature. I find it almost prophetic that the readings Kate chose for today are so *à propos*. All of them take place just before a death: Elijah is about to be taken into heaven; Jesus is about to be crucified; Dietrich Bonhoeffer will soon be hung for his participation in a plot to assassinate Hitler. Their friends are left to grieve. On this second Sunday in the *Season of Remembrance*, our emphasis is on friends and members of the community who have died. We remember and honor all of them today. But on this post-election Sunday, it is also incumbent upon us to grieve for our community itself, our nation.

At the same time, we're looking for ways to mobilize our indignation into right action. You may have noticed that we're recording this sermon. That's because a call went out this week from a group called *Faithful America* to pastors all over the country asking us to "speak bravely and prophetically about what our faith requires of us in this moment of crisis. We need to make sure those sermons are heard not just by those in the pews, but by everyone who is fearful and wondering if it's safe to speak up."

There is a flyer with information about *Faithful America* and another with an option for you to be part of the movement in a petition that reads: *As a follower of Jesus, I will join with my sisters and brothers in resisting any and all attacks by the Trump administration on the most vulnerable among us. Following the examples of the saints and martyrs, and guided by prayer and discernment, I am prepared if necessary to risk my own safety and well being for the sake of others.*

Can you hear the echo of the words from John's gospel: "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends"? You shouldn't sign this petition without weighing what Bonhoeffer called "the cost of discipleship." It's not just about Jesus laying down his life for us; it's about us taking up a cross and following. This is serious business.

Another call that has gone out this week is [#safetypin](#), which was actually inspired by a movement in the United Kingdom. Following the "Brexit" vote, many people in the UK began wearing a safety pin to show their solidarity with refugees and immigrants – "so that without a word, people may see your safety pin and know that you're a friendly face, that they are 'safe' with you."

Now I have to tell you that not everyone supports this idea. And I agree with critique that it could be an easy, feel-good thing to do with no real intention behind it. And I agree with the questions being raised, such as just how much is one ready to risk? And should there be training for this? These are good questions and should be taken into account. I, for one, am willing to wear the pin. I liken it to the yellow star worn by non-Jewish people in France and the Netherlands during the Nazi occupation as a sign of solidarity. I pledge to stand with and for persons of all races, ages, ethnicities, gender identities, economic status, physical and mental abilities. There are pins here for anyone who wants one. But I strongly discourage wearing it because it's the "in" thing to do. And I strongly encourage all of us to take any of these actions only with a solid spiritual foundation.

This is serious. Read the examples in the *Chron* and ask yourself what you would do:

- A woman on BART, speaking on the phone in Assyrian, was confronted by another woman, who called her "an ugly, mean, evil little pig who might get deported."
- A woman at a gas station in Napa witnessed a man walk up to an Asian-American woman and say, over and over again, "We won. Now get the f--- out of my country"
- A SF woman wrote on Facebook that a white man shoved her and then drew a knife on her. She says he called her the n-word "very aggressively for several minutes."

I've never been a big fan of the battle imagery in the passage from Ephesians, but it does seem to apply today: "Draw your strength from Christ and from the strength of that mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can stand firm against the tactics of the

Devil. You must put on the armor of God if you are to resist on the evil day, and having done everything you can, to hold your ground.”

Don't be distracted by the “Devil” or the “evil day” language. But know that evil does exist, not only in the hearts of people who would go against God's will of peace, compassion, and justice for all people and all creation – but also in the systems that propagate racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and all manner of mayhem.

Like it or not, we are part of those systems and must have a good measure of humility in our condemnation of others. At the same time, we must work to transform hearts (including our own) and to transform systems in the hard work of discipleship.

The time for a positive Christian response to hatred and bigotry is now. I can't believe it was just two short weeks ago, on Reformation Sunday, that I talked about the Confessing Church in Germany, those pastors and congregations who were willing – unlike many – to go against the Nazi regime. It's not hyperbole to say that parallels have been drawn. Please do read the article in *KIT* called “Time for Healing. And Resistance” by Jim Wallace from *Sojourners*. There is a movement growing. We will not allow others who call themselves Christian to hijack Jesus any longer.

This is not a call to be afraid. It is a call to be faithful. We, as a congregation, will continue to be committed to this work. I pray that we will have the courage and commitment to stand united – First United – on the forefront of spiritual and political transformation, here in San Francisco, in all the other communities in which we live and work, in our nation, and in our world; to pay the cost of discipleship gladly for Christ's sake.

Amen

2 Kings 2:1-12

*The transition of prophetic power is marked by the change of the mantel of prophecy. The symbol of the mantel and crossing signals transition carry the passage. Amidst all this transition the role of service remains.*

*It is written . . .*

When YHWH was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here. YHWH is sending me to Bethel.”

“As YHWH live, and you live,” said Elisha, “I will not leave you.”

So they departed together for Bethel.

The disciples of the prophets in Bethel approached Elisha, asking, “Do you know that YHWH is going to Elijah from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” Elisha replied, “now be silent.”

Then Elijah spoke, “Stay here, Elisha. YHWH is sending me to Jericho.”

And Elisha replied, “As YHWH lives, and as you live, I will not leave you.”

So they went to Jericho. The disciples of prophets in Jericho approached Elisha, asking, “Do you know that YHWH is going to take Elijah from you today?”

“Yes, I know,” he said, “now be silent.”

Then Elijah said to Elisha, “Stay here. YHWH is sending me to the Jordan.”

“As YHWH lives and as you live,” said Elisha, “I will not leave you.”

So the two of them walked on. Fifty disciples of prophets stood off at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry land.

Once across, Elijah said to Elisha, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”

Elisha replied, “Let me inherit two-thirds of your spirit,” he said.

“You ask a difficult thing,” Elijah said. “If you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours - otherwise not.”

As they were walking along and chatting with each other, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and cavalry of Israel!” And Elisha saw nothing more. Then he took hold of his clothes and tore them apart.

## Second Reading

An excerpt from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*

Christmas Eve 1943

To Renate and Eberhard Bethge,

I should like to say something to help you in the time of separation that lies ahead. There is no need to say how hard any such separation is for us; but as I've now been separated for nine months from all the people that I'm devoted to, I have some experiences that I should like to pass on to you. So far, Eberhard and I have exchanged all the experiences that have been important to us, and this has been a great help to us; now you, Renate, will have some part in this. You must try to forget your 'uncle' and think more of your husband's friend.

First: nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute: we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; he doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us to maintain our former communion with each other even at the cost of pain.

Secondly: the dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh but as a precious gift in themselves. We must take care not to wallow in our memories or hand ourselves over to them, just as we do not gaze all the time at a valuable present, but only at special time, and apart from these keep it simply as a hidden treasure that is ours for certain. In this way the past gives us lasting joy and strength.

Thirdly: times of separation are not a total loss or unprofitable for our companionship, or at any rate they need not be so. In spite of all the difficulties that they bring, they can be the means of strengthening fellowship quite remarkably.

Fourthly: I've learnt here especially that the *facts* can always be mastered, and that difficulties are magnified out of all proportion simply by fear and anxiety. From the moment we wake until we fall asleep we must commend other people wholly and unreservedly to God and leave them in his hands, and transform our anxiety for them into prayers on their behalf:

With sorrow and with grief...  
God *will not* be distracted.

John 15:12-17

*Love opens the floodgates of divine energy to flow from us to others. Laying down our lives for each other, then, is not a sacrifice but an expansion and growing of our authentic selfhood. Our willingness to go beyond self-interest opens us to the larger selfhood of Christ, whose love identifies with all creation. This is the foundation of peace, in which our self-concern is identified with the well-being of larger and larger circles of reality.*

*It is written . . .*

This is my commandment:  
love one another as I have loved you.  
There is no greater love

than to lay down one's life for one's friends.  
And you are my friends,  
if you do what I command you.  
I no longer speak of you as subordinates,  
because a subordinate doesn't know a superior's business.  
Instead I call you friends,  
because I have made known to you  
everything I have learned from Abba God.  
It was not you who chose me;  
it was I who chose you  
to go forth and bear fruit.  
Your fruit must endure,  
so that whatever you ask of Abba God in my name  
God will give you.  
This command I give you:  
that you love one another.