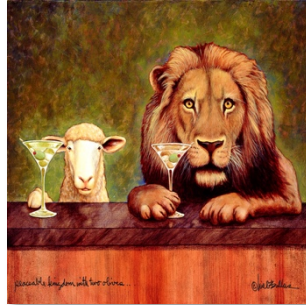


“A Thought for What Is Noble”

Rev. David Gregory

January 24, 2021

Epiphany 3



Peaceable Kingdom With Two Olives
Will Bullas

Readings

Romans 12:15-18, 21 from the Revised Standard Version

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

An Excerpt from “The Hill We Climb”
by Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman

In this truth
in this faith we trust
For while we have our eyes on the future
history has its eyes on us
This is the era of just redemption
We feared at its inception
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs
of such a terrifying hour
but within it we found the power
to author a new chapter
To offer hope and laughter to ourselves
So while once we asked,
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?
Now we assert
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?

After several harrowing and historic weeks, I would love to create an opportunity to think of something besides politics or ideology to celebrate the great gifts that we have as a nation and to move forward from a very difficult time into a future where we begin to solve our deepest crises and begin to work toward positivity and unity. Our prayers remain with our new leadership for love, wisdom, and tenacity in the face of unprecedented challenges, and we wish them well in this endeavor. But we all know that a transfer of power—whether peaceful or contentious—does not change basic ideologies or suddenly shift deeply-held ideals that people are sometimes willing to commit crimes or acts of violence in order to maintain. Unity—the theme that drove this week’s inaugural address—is elusive. It always has been. You need not spend a whole lot of time in the history books to find that our founding fathers were unified in little else than their opposition to the British Crown. What the new nation would look like and how it would operate has been and continues to be the subject of contentious debate. When we look at polarization and rancor we should remind ourselves that this is nothing new. We’ve learned a few things over time, though, and one is that unity does not require unanimity. Unanimity requires that we share the same ideals. Unity just requires a shared behavior. Unity means that we make nice, even when we disagree with an outcome.

Over the years there have been certain national elections which left me euphoric, while others found me deeply disappointed, and this will be true for as many elections as I live to see. My euphoria does not give me the right to trample on the disappointments of others, and my disappointments do not give me the right to trample the Constitution. There is a piece from the 12th chapter of the Letter to the Romans that I quote often, and I think of it as a manifesto for good behavior. These words and principles are not unique to Christian faith, and they show up in the writings of many other traditions, which leads me to believe that they’re just obvious statements of what it means to be human. It’s a lot like the Golden Rule in that if we could all agree on just one thing, it should be this.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

So, it begins with empathy, or the ability to understand and feel what others feel. It moves into a humble, vulnerable place where I can freely admit that I do not have all the answers. It does not seek vengeance in disagreements, but takes thought for what is noble, just, and right, in any given situation.

The Apostle—or whoever penned these words—is speaking with reference to the church at Rome, and certainly the divisions that exist in the church are there because the church is a collection of humans, and where you have humans, you have disagreement. It has nothing to do with being liberal or conservative, evangelical or mainline, Catholic or Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or spiritual-but-not-religious. It’s not about being Republican or Democrat. It’s about being a decent human being who makes room for the ideas of others.

I'll confess that over the last four years in particular, I've found that this is something I'm really not that good at, and that I've been waiting with anticipation for the pendulum to swing far in the opposite direction from where it has been. I have no doubt that there will be a concerted effort to send it flying back the other way again. For generations we have seemed locked in this never-ending battle that knows no end.

History may look back on January 2021 as the "month of the Wednesdays." We have just lived through three historic Wednesdays in a row, from insurrection to impeachment to inauguration. Regardless of our politics, there can be little doubt that our new leaders have an agenda that seeks peace, truth, and harmony in the tradition of this Romans 12 "manifesto." The cynic inside of us might note that we've heard these things before from people of many persuasions. But this time holds a new gravitas, born from a fearful place where the very bedrock of our lives and our institutions has been threatened. This time when prompted to "take thought for what is noble in the sight of all," we might be more inclined than ever to take up the challenge, precisely because we came so perilously close to losing our Constitution. What gives me hope that things can be different this time around is the great display of nobility in the bright, fresh cadence of a work entitled "The Hill We Climb," delivered by a youthful poet who instantly and forever will be a household name. We may be coming from a time of entrenchment and political (and physical) warfare. On the first Wednesday of January, we might have felt trapped by our fears and dismayed by our uncertainties as the hordes stormed our Capitol building. But on the third Wednesday we were set free to soar like eagles by the words of this new generation's Maya Angelou, by the poetic and prophetic voice of Amanda Gorman who asserts that "we did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour, but within it we found the power to author a new chapter ...".

I cannot say what the future holds. I do not know if the genie can ever go back into the bottle, if demonstrable facts can ever be revered as they once were, if our norms and traditions can hold value for all, or if the struggles we faced in the year 2020 can ever be fully healed. But I would say, along with the ancient prophet, "And a child shall lead them ...". My money is on our newest prophet and others like her.

