

Proper 27 Year B 2024

So I begin with some facts: We have just elected a man to the nation's highest office who is a convicted felon.... Thirty four felonies... a man who is a sexual abuser of women; a man who engineered an attack on our nation's capital in order to overturn an election which he lost... a man who is a pathological liar. That is not my partisan opinion. Those are facts... And it is a fact that he was elected by the majority of our nation's voting population. How can this be?

It is all so unfathomable, but I can only say that I am grief stricken for our democracy; I think our democracy is in serious danger; but I think that what happened on November 5th was a long time coming. Experts are weighing in on just what happened: Harris was nominated without a primary, so she wasn't the consensual candidate for the Democrat Party; the high price of groceries and housing; David Axelrod, democratic strategist observes, that there is a decided anti-incumbent attitude, not just in the U.S. but in other western democracies as well, that there is a pervasive dissatisfaction among the voting populace. Some argue that such dissatisfaction arises from a shrinking middle class. More and more households struggle to make ends meet. The dollar just doesn't buy what it used to. The disparity between a minimum wage and a living wage is immense. The economy, by traditional measurements, is booming; the stock market is at an all-time high... but the reality is that a vast segment of the population isn't seeing such prosperity. More than at any time in our history, the rich are getting richer, while the so-called

working class is falling behind. Government has ceased being an advocate for the rank and file citizen. Government has become infrastructure for the insatiable profit motive of corporations... Now the wealthy vote for the policies that preserve the status quo, while the rest are insisting on change... There is no middle to speak of....that's my two cents among so many speculations.

What I am saying is that the system, our American Democracy, is broken. But it always has been. The U.S. Constitution, and its Bill of Rights were flawed since their inception. They were written by landowning white men. The rights of women, and people of color were excluded. From the beginning Free Enterprise in a capitalist system was the means of economic prosperity, and such a system was designed to be controlled by the elite. In spite of an over-abundance of resources in this the richest country in the world, there has always been a marked disparity of wealth. Much of our economy, over our history, was built not so much by an upwardly mobile work ethic, but on the backs of enslaved people. Cheap labor has always been the engine of our economy. And those chickens are coming home to roost.

A few months ago Katharine and I took a vacation in Panama City Florida where my mother owns a beach cottage. We packed the car, got ready to lock the house... and at the last minute I stopped to get a book to read while we were away. For some reason I grabbed from our shelves Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. I was sure that at some time in my academic career I was meant to read it, but I had no

such remembrance. Maybe I read the Cliff's Notes.... The novel is as stunning as it is prophetic. The prose majestic, the pathos, profound. You may remember the plot: A farming family living in Oklahoma during the dust bowl drought have been ruined financially. The crops have failed; food is scarce; despair is all around. Word was that there were good paying jobs in California; untold acreage of fertile soil, plentiful water, ideal growing conditions for any crop; endless opportunity. As the American dream had dried up in the wasteland of Oklahoma, it beckoned with renewed life and vigor from hills and valleys of the Promised Land called California. The family, the Joads, travel perilously to California only to find that the rumored prosperity of this land of promise had been swallowed up by the elite land owners and agricultural corporations who made their profits on the backs of under-paid laborers, who found themselves struggling for mere survival.

The novel proposes that the so-called American Dream is in fact a fantasy, the massive prosperity of our land notwithstanding. It is a condemnation of the capitalist system, what Steinbeck refers to as an insatiable monster; a system in which the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Institutionalized economic injustice, in short. There was a window in our history wherein government exercised some control over the monster... We called it the New Deal, under Roosevelt... Yes, Free Enterprise... yes capitalism... but under the auspices and control of the government. During that time, bridges, and highways, and tunnels, and airports were built all over the country. Jobs were created by the millions. Sociologists argue that this was a time in

which the American Middle Class came into its own. Labor Unions, with a new found right of collective bargaining, flourished, representing labor as partners with owners and management. A family could afford a house with just a single wage earner. Productivity soared. Prosperity, more than at any time in our history, was shared. Alas, such a system has been systematically dismantled over the course of the last fifty years. The Monster is now unrestrained; our government, a mere errand boy for the board rooms of corporate America and the designs of special interests.

I am, of course describing a modern version of “empire.” The top down control of the powerful, a hierarchy of greed and deception. A broken system evokes bad choices. Perhaps that is what has happened: a bad choice authored by a bad system. And if we know anything of history, we know that empires rise and fall; and we know now that we are no exception. Perhaps, at this moment in our history, we are seeing the beginning of the fall of the American Empire. Shouldn’t we have seen it coming? Perhaps, we are witnessing a shattering of our naiveté... our idolatrous belief in a flawed political institution that history proclaims is, at best, only temporary. Plato extolled a democratic government, but he also warned against its susceptibility to power.... And power corrupts.

Good people, the governments of men, and the societies they create will not save us. They never have, and they never will. We have been coerced into believing in American exceptionalism, that our version of empire is good and true. The

prophets of Israel warned their people against making one of their own, a king. All of the tribulations of Israel's biblical history are due to just one thing... the abuse of power at the hands of hierarchy. Jesus, himself, spent an inordinate amount of time in his teaching and preaching pointing a critical finger at the empire, and all else who would assume power over another. Jesus called for a society of equals in which wealth is shared. He recognized that the poor were not meant to be, but were a result of the corruption that comes with power. Jesus never argued for a great nation; he argued for a great community; a community in which we tend to each other; a community that invites the refugee and immigrant, the poor and the disenfranchised. A community whose creed is Love your neighbor. Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats will save us... only Love will save us. Love is our country. Love is our homeland. Love is our pledge of allegiance.

Brothers and sisters, we belong to a movement that engenders well-being and dignity amid the injustices of empire. Our calling will outlast any faux permanence an empire can give, because Love is not temporary; Love is forever. We also belong to a movement, a way of life that rejects despair and fear. That is a choice. That is a choice we must make at this critical moment in our history. We choose courage, knowing that God's Love will triumph over the mere principalities and powers of our world. This land in which we live is my home that I love, but my allegiance is to the Love of God... and I can sleep at night knowing that that is my ultimate choice. Our vocation remains the same... to Love our neighbor... to welcome

the immigrant, to heal the sick, and give succor to the poor; to strive for justice; to respect the dignity of every human being.

Jesus tells us in today's Gospel reading that in the face of the empire, and the vassals of such power... those who would devour the widows' houses... we turn our attention and our Love toward the poor widow. That is where our wisdom lies... in the hearts of the poor and the marginalized. It is they who teach us greatness... the greatness of sacrifice and courage and community... the greatness of vision and perspective and empathy... that nothing matters as much as simply giving our lives to the good of the whole... giving our lives to the glory of God who made us and sustains us.

Our allegiance is to the way of Jesus. Our allegiance is to the way of compassion, kindness, hospitality, and justice. Living under the hand of empire merely assures us that we will always have work to do. Our courageous response to our world in all of its brokenness is ever the same... We bear the healing Love of God as activists to our wounded. What purpose, what vocation, what joy. And still we rise... and still we rise.