

**Being a Christian is so hard. But it's worth it.**

**October 22, 2023**

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**Ezekiel 34:2-24, Micah 6:8**

Our world is in a dangerously precarious time. And our country is in a dangerously precarious time.

This morning I continue with this October series inspired by Walter Brueggemann's book Ancient Echoes: Refusing the Fear Filled Greed Driven Toxicity of the Far Right. Hear Brueggemann's voice again as he says "It is now high time for churches and their pastors, to speak out about this crisis moment in our land. We must resist the propensity of fascism that wants to reduce political influence to the privileged and entitled few." I add "Resist the manipulation of the oppressed masses by the billionaire class".

One of the fundamental beliefs of the far-right wing is that government is bad. All government. "The claim comes from those who imagine themselves to be self-made, self-sufficient, self-secure and who regard any government action as simply an unwelcome intrusion on their self-made lives."

No thanks to Ronald Reagan, did he plant the seeds for the extremist movement years ago, which evolved into the tea party and is now obstructing our democratic process...? No thanks to Reagan who said that the 9 most terrifying words are "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." In the same speech, he blatantly contradicted himself, but the people didn't hear it as contradiction when he bragged about the billions of federal dollars he had given to farmers.

Ronald Reagan and his advisors must not have read the earliest known writing in the western tradition, about the essential role of good government. 1750 BCE Babylon. This bedrock of what good leadership looks like evaded them and continues to evade too many public officials. Almost 4 thousand years ago Hammurabi declares that he was appointed "to promote the welfare of the people, cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and evil so that the strong might not oppress the weak."

The wise ones in the ancient near east world, like Ezekial, knew this wisdom. In the Hebrew tradition it was expressed with the metaphor of the good shepherd. They knew bad shepherds and they knew the possibility of good shepherds. Ezekiel describes the impact on

society, indeed the failure of government, when the shepherd, the leader, acts in self-serving ways. “Ezekial indicts the bad shepherds on the counts of venality, self-interest, and exploitation of those for whom they were responsible. It’s a dereliction of duty. *You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.*”

But it need not be so. Leaders are not inevitably self-serving. Government is not intrinsically bad. Quite the opposite! government is needed for the wellbeing, security, and prosperity of all!

At one point in his lengthy description of bad shepherds/ bad rulers/bad government and the contrast with good shepherds/good leaders/ good government, the prophet Ezekial, speaking for God, says simply and profoundly: ***I will feed them with justice.*** And then God, through God’s messenger Ezekial promises a good shepherd/ a good leader, who will restore good governance. *I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David and he shall lead them. **He shall feed them and be their shepherd.***”

Good governance is possible. Never perfect. But it can lean toward justice more and more, and away from injustice....

Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day’s colleague in the marvelous Catholic worker movement of the 1930s, said how a good, well-run society helps people be good. It doesn’t just rein in the greedy, bigoted people but it actually helps people lean into goodness and away from greed and bigotry. Good government has a huge ripple effect on our spirits and our behaviors. Good governance draws people into being good.

But here’s the thing and this thing is so important, it’s been on my heart ever since I began engaging with Brueggman’s prophetic call these last couple of month... Even when people are not good, when they are greedy and violent and prejudiced, we must love them. We must be kind. We must not indulge in our own reactivity and revulsion.

Doesn’t the Micah passage only become more remarkable the older you get? Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God.

Speak out and act boldly for justice, don’t deny what’s going on nor despair over it, rather speak out and organize. But *also* do kindness in every drop of existence to everyone! Be kind to everyone.

This is hard. Maybe even harder than doing justice.... This kindness...

What's *your* automatic thought when you see someone wearing a MAGA hat? If it's venomous, God calls you to reform your second thought, and soften your gaze, and maybe even smile... if you are walking around the lake say good morning to that person. And mean it.

I am preaching to myself right now. I confess. I live in a bubble—family, friends, neighbors. Except when I go up North to my favorite place on this earth at Leech Lake and with the exception of entering reservation land, in almost all other places, almost all of the signs, signal that I'm in Far-Right Land.

When I live up North for a month in the summer, live in the woods, I tend to take a break from the news. Give my mind and heart a rest. But still my strong anti far right reactivity stays in place. I so have to work on it. Because it's against my religion which tells me to love my enemies. I am against them, what they stand for, what they are trying to do to our country, our land, our children, but I can still love them. I must. Love, not the emotional good feelings, but the heart-felt knowing that they are beloved children of God.

I remember one day in August when we went on a day trip to Park Rapids to visit an art gallery and book store. But between Walker and Park Rapids, just off the highway, there was a huge Trump store, with a huge parking lot and huge signs and flags and lights everywhere. There in the rural North woods! This! I wanted to stop and check it out but my spouse, wisely, drove on.

We had a delightful time in the town and then on the way back to the cabin we stopped in Walker. My spouse and I have both been going to Walker for over 60 years. We've seen the changes. There's a brew pub in town we enjoy stopping at after buying groceries or lumber. It is simple, has a Scandinavian architectural vibe, and you can bring your dog and go outside and sit at a table and watch the light change over the lake as the sun sets. You can pick up ribs from Piggy's a block away, get a beer, with or without alcohol, and just relax. It's perfect for vacation.

That day, the day we saw the huge Trump store off the highway in the rural north country, the only table left outside was next to a table full, seven of them, of white people, men and women, athletic and fit, sporting all manner of tee shirts, every one of them, and tattoos with symbols and words representing the far right.

I sat glaring at their backs. My first thought-feeling was disgust and anger, (tied to my knowing, knowing, knowing the danger they pose to our government, and to people I love with darker skin or a different religion or sexual orientation or gender...) Do I need to leave, I wondered?, or say something?

Then something happened. And it wasn't because of me. I hadn't, in that moment, challenged my automatic thought with a more deeply ingrained religious loving kindness thought,... I didn't initiate it. It was the big guy, the older guy at the table, who looked back and saw our dog and asked if he could pet Axel and we chatted a little, laughed a little, agreed that the IPA was delicious. My eyes changed from judging to kind... I could feel it.

That was not the moment to engage in political debate. I would not have shrunk away from that if it arose. And there didn't appear to be any explicit bullying or excluding of marginalized people in that space in that moment. I would have summoned the courage to stand by the oppressed. Instead, with the beauty of the sunset, the sky, the lake, the feeling of the place, this was the time for more kindness in the world; seeing one another's humanity; knowing our deeper connection to one another, deeper than all political beliefs, deeper than our hidden woundedness. We will not cast someone out of our heart because of the signs on their t shirts and bodies.

Oh this being a Christian, a person of faith, is so hard, sometimes. What it asks of us. To do justice AND love kindness (which includes loving our enemy) is hard.

I wonder if Micah's "walking humbly with God" requirement is what makes it possible to do the other two things, especially when they are in tension, when we are in the presence of the enemy, the one whose goals we are vehemently against.

Walking humbly with God... does that mean always being in touch with something greater than ourselves?... putting God, the ultimate referent, at the center of our lives each and every day of our life?... grounding ourselves in prayer?... Practicing prayerful essence habits that will automatically kick in when we are out of our mind with anger, hatred, or anxiety?... creating intentional time for God infusions so we can exude God throughout our days?...

In these times, let us seek out accurate news sources. Let us always be learning history, the complexity of history. Let us be aware of our own reactivity and reform our thoughts and actions. Again and again through life, "letting go of unwise parts of ourselves and extending our compassion in new ways to the world around us."(Kornfield)

Yes, this is so hard. This Jesus path wisdom way. It's why we need one another as encouragers and we need prayer for courage to speak out and organize for good governance *and* prayer for a soft heart that we may be ever kind, to everyone.

So hard but so good. It's the only life worth living.

Oh God help us!

## Sources

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