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MINDFUL POLITICS **Or, How to Save the World**

A Sermon by

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Text

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. We shall

hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

I was driving in Newton when I heard on NPR about the arrests in England. I felt this horrible resonance with how I learned of the 9/11 attacks also while driving in Newton. I looked down at my hands on the steering wheel and could see my knuckles whitening. Boston was mentioned. Maybe a flight to Boston was a target. But maybe not, it just wasn't clear at the time. I felt an inchoate fear wash through me like an ocean wave. The next wave was larger. It was anger. I felt attacked, personally, and I found brief violent thoughts of fight rather more than thoughts of flight surging through me, white caps dancing on surging waves.

Later the president paused to address the nation while on a break from his vacation in Crawford for a political fundraising trip to Wisconsin. In that speech he said and I quote how our "... nation is at war with Islamic fascists who will use any means to destroy those of us who love freedom..." I had a new cascade of hateful emotions. First was driven by his attempting to tie the word fascist to Islam. While there is a loose connection between what inspires these terrorists and fascism as a form of conservative totalitarianism, ultimately calling the phenomenon Islamic Fascism or Islamofascism is like those who tie the word Nazi to Israel. Perhaps it's great for the rhetoric game, but it's very bad in helping us to know what we're dealing with. The war threatening to engulf us is not properly with fascism, something, frankly, we need to worry about more on the home front. This loose rhetorical usage like stating those who are behind this conflict are "enemies of freedom" is meant to inflame, not

are enemies of freedom is meant to inflame, not inform.

The fire raging across the Middle East and threatening to burn us all is found in a long smoldering sense of powerlessness and resentment, a weaving real and imagined, and given stark focus and a solution in religious fundamentalism. It's that sense of powerlessness and resentment and its response as fundamentalism we need to attend to understand if we really hope to shift the course of events.

It's hard to look for causes when we're afraid and angry. I know. As I listened to the president's speech and his beginning with that rhetorical flourish, I watched myself becoming angry. Very, very angry at the president and those around him and the incompetence and venality of his government and the way he seems to have botched just about everything in relation to this horrific mess. In a heartbeat my anger shifted to fear. I was afraid. I was afraid for us, I felt afraid for the world.

Here's the all too common situation. Anger, fear, and of course, following them like night follows day: violence. That's the most common, immediate response to fear and anger. Here's the point. When these demons rule, nothing is safe. These are bad times. These are dangerous times. There's a storm gathering, there's a storm raging across the land. To shift the metaphor violence is a lion wandering about seeking whom he may devour. And then to draw upon one more metaphor, what I so worry about, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye, and soon the whole world is blind."

I struggle with violence for two reasons. One, because of my spiritual ideals, my profound sense we, every blessed person and thing on this planet are in fact all deeply connected. So, who is it we're violent

against naunts me? But there's a second reason, particularly in the big areas such as when we speak of war. I'm concerned about unintended consequences. Too often I've observed a violent action has not solved a problem, but only shifted it, and sometimes made it worse.

That said I'm not a pacifist. I come close. I'm very hesitant about the utility of violence. But, I can't claim that name any more than someone who occasionally eats some fish or chicken can call themselves a vegetarian. I believe in self-defense. I believe in self-defense for people as individuals and for communities. I look into my heart, try to see clearly, and know in that horrific hypothetical, if the murderer breaks into my home, if I could I would kill to defend Jan and auntie. I find violence is a raging lion, but it is also sometimes for most of us it is going to be a necessary option.

If we hope to have any way through, to realistically limit violence, to direct it only in the rarest of events and then only in the most incisive way, this can only happen if I allow myself, if we allow ourselves to see as big as possible, as inclusively as possible. How do I remind myself in the worst moments my family isn't just Jan and auntie; it includes that hypothetical killer who has broken into my home, and whom I know I'd kill to defend auntie?

For that matter how do I remind myself that my great political *bete noir* of the day George Bush is part of the family? As are all the players in the horrific conflict in the Middle East? How do I remind myself to act cleanly trying to limit and focus the consequences of my actions? As a solution I hold up for your consideration the term "Mindful Politics" as such a way. Politics seems ultimately to come from the Greek for "affairs of state." It derives from "politic" an adjective defined as meaning in various shades as

shrewd, prudent, expedient, discreet, diplomatic, artful, crafty and cunning. Mindful is another adjective with meanings like bearing in mind, regardful, attentive, heedful and observant. I look at our lives and life of this planet, I see the violence that sweeps across our human existence, the tremendous fragility of our existence; and I believe we must embrace something like a Mindful Politics if we want any hope of making that way through.

While today's sermon title is *Mindful Politics* and the title comes from a new book just out edited by Melvin McLeod, and it's a great book, and I really recommend it to those who want to pursue this question more deeply; in fact I only passingly refer to it in today's reflection.

While rooting around the web looking for pointers for Mindful Politics I found one list I thought particularly helpful. Tom Armstrong wrote a broadside against those who claim the term but who seem simply to define one political perspective as mindful. It was the political perspective he, and I should add I, and frankly the larger number of us in this room, seem to share. Tom pointed out how dangerous that is when we identify our party or perspective as normative, as the baseline, as what is true; particularly in the light of how important this process can be if it is honestly and self-critically engaged.

He gives four suggestions. First "It has to be 'big picture.'" That is we just can't assume our perspective is the only one. We have to constantly make our view bigger, open ourselves to the other as a necessary way to see a real picture, or at least a more real picture. Second "Accepting what you find, in all its field of grays." Start with what is, as clearly as possible, not what we wish or want, not what we feel a need to defend, but what is. This demands a continuous openness to correction. And so, third "It

requires an effort to understand the viewpoint of the supposed opponent." Personally, I think we can drop the "supposed." If we simply dismiss those with whom we disagree as something like "evil" we can't see the nuance, we can't find the possibility there can be common ground, a solution that doesn't demand one side or the other die. Which is Tom's fourth point, "It requires that one not pre-judge and be open to the good in other viewpoints."

I find this a pretty good map of a wise way to deal with life. Another good brief list of pointers I did find in McLeod's book. It was in a chapter called "Joining Heaven and Earth: Jerry Brown, Bernie Glassman, and James Gimian on lofty ideals versus hard realities." Jerry Brown is a former governor of California, most recently Mayor of my birth town, Oakland, and I find one of the more interesting gadflies on our American political scene. Gimian is a publisher and an authority on the Chinese classic *The Art of War*. Bernie Glassman is one of my heroes, a spiritual gadfly, a Jewish Zen master and social justice activist. In this conversation Bernie suggests three points to create a Mindful Politics.

Bernie's markers are one, not knowing; two, bearing witness; and three, taking action. As we go through these points I'll use as a practical example my own emotional connection to our current president. It's a little easier to see how it might work than going straight for the extreme, like the Fundamentalist Islamic war on the West and in particular America. Although I suggest it works there, as well.

What is "not knowing" that's the first point of a successful Mindful Politics? It's found when we are less concerned with being right and more concerned with understanding. It is found in that most important human experience, curiosity. With anger and fear we shut down, our vision is constrained, like blinders were

shut down, our vision is constrained, like blinders were put on us. If we hesitate just a little, if we seek to know what and why, we open enormous possibilities.

I need to try and learn what I can from the president and the current government's attempts to deal with our times. They're not evil people, even if I sometimes feel they are. Rather, by their own best lights they're trying to do something, even those who have the stink of the profiteer about them, even the Fundamentalists of a different religion than Islam among them. Most importantly I need to be willing to accept the good when those I don't like, or, frankly, deeply don't trust, offer it. To do so I need to remain curious and open. I need to not know.

If, instead, we just bear witness, if we don't turn away from what is as it is happening; then we stand a chance. We won't necessarily be caught in our imaginations, in our dream visions of reality that in fact only approximate reality. Here for me George Bush is allowed to be who he is rather than the caricature I've carefully created over the years. Doesn't mean his presidency hasn't been a disaster for the Republic. But it does mean he is someone struggling amongst his own demons to serve. I need to see that. We need to see that. He isn't the devil. He's a suffering human being who for many different reasons has come to see the world very differently than I do. I need to try and see through his eyes. And many other eyes, as well. I need to be open.


And, out of that, not knowing and bearing witness; I need to take action. We need to take action. Not knowing and bearing witness are completed only in action. There is no divide in our world between a higher spirituality and a dirty fleshiness. It's all one.


I believe as the next national election cycle comes I need to do what I can to change the mix in

Congress. I believe we need to make a major course change. I'm deeply worried about how we were dragged into an optional war instead of focusing on the real issues. I'm deeply concerned about our own drift toward a conservative totalitarianism. Although, frankly, these need to be topics for future sermons.

The point is, if we choose not to take action out of fear or anger, but instead out of a process of curiosity, of openness, of a desire to be as large as possible; then as we must of necessity act, those actions, even if they involve war, will be less destructive and more likely to bring us through to that day when we realize how truly "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

Amen

 Close

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