

Rev. DC Fortune
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UUCSV

The moral questions before us (on Tuesday)

There is a lot to talk about this morning. Some of what I am about to say may make you uncomfortable. Some of it may sound harsh. I invite you to remember that you are safe in this space, even if you are uncomfortable. The decisions before us this week will have ramifications that may change the arc of history. Whether that change is for good or bad is up to us.

In just over 56 hours, polling places up and down the east coast will begin to count the ballots that may well determine the future of the great experiment we know as American democracy.

Think about that.

We have a significant choice before us, and it is stark. Will we vote to preserve democracy, or will we vote for the forces of autocracy that seek to make elections irrelevant?

Think I'm being hyperbolic? Overly dramatic? The Republican nominee for Governor in Wisconsin has promised his followers that if he is elected, and his party gets the supermajority in the state legislature recently redistricted to guarantee that outcome, that they will "reform election laws" so that "Republicans will never lose another election after I'm governor."

For real. He said that.

It is not outrageous to say that the United States is now where Germany was in the 1930s. History confirms that reality.

Keep in mind that Hitler won the election that put him in power.

Keep in mind that it was not just the military that kept him in power – it was bands of armed vigilantes – volunteers emboldened by his violent rhetoric – who did much of the damage at the local level. The vigilante groups were loosely organized and enthusiastic supporters of a set of beliefs that blamed all of Germany's economic ills at the time on immigrants and Jews and others who were safe to label as "other."

Today, we have loosely organized groups that are well-armed and similarly convinced that all of what makes them uncomfortable is the fault of “others,” in this case, liberals, scientists, immigrants, and public servants who are dedicated to the law.

People are not unlike matter as described by Newton centuries ago: if we are at rest, we tend to stay at rest unless acted upon by some force. If we are in motion, we tend to stay in motion unless acted upon by some force. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Every time we make progress, there is pushback, some would say even backlash.

Because people who are comfortable want to stay comfortable and resist being acted upon by some outside force. And for every action, there is an equal but opposite RE-action.

And yet, progress happens. It always does, eventually. But it is never simple, and never easy. The world we live in today is polarized in dangerous ways. There is a large segment of our society that prefers to believe in conspiracy theories and utter nonsense. They have divorced themselves from reason and are willing to say and do violent things to defend their delusions.

Again, this is not hyperbole. It is real.

They have rejected science – denied covid, denied global climate change, rejected medical care like vaccines.

Why?

It is easy to say that people are afraid of things they do not understand, that they do not trust systems and processes in which they had no input, but this goes much deeper than that.

This is about denying culpability. This is about avoiding accountability. This is about refusing to examine – and abandon – historical privilege.

Because if we acknowledge that covid is real, we must acknowledge that we are vulnerable mortals and that our national response to it was criminally negligent. If we acknowledge that climate change is real, we must acknowledge that we are responsible for it through our gluttonous consumerism: our enormous, gas-guzzling

vehicles, our dependence upon fossil fuels, our commitment to our comfort and convenience at the price of exploiting our planet to the point of crisis. Nobody wants to be held up as an example of that kind of self-indulgent ass, and fewer still want to give up the many comforts of that lifestyle. We WANT to be hot in our homes in January. We WANT to be cold in our houses in July. We WANT lettuce all winter. We WANT an awful lot that is killing our planet.

Nobody likes to be wrong.

Nobody likes to be exposed as a fool.

Nobody wants to admit that they've bought into a scam.

And so when those things are exposed, our own fragility causes us to double down and defend those bad decisions.

It is like a gambler who tries to dig their way out of a losing night by betting more, hoping to break even or even win a little before they go home.

That's never how it works.

When you're in a scam, the house always wins.

The only way out is to stop playing, cut your losses, and walk away.

Doing that requires a big slice of humility, and a willingness to change one's priorities. And it is not easy. In fact, it is very, very hard.

In his book "Moral Man and Immoral Society," Reinhold Niebuhr argued that people, acting individually, were moral beings and would tend to do what is right on their own.

Mostly.

But put them together in a group, and the level of morality they displayed would fall to the lowest common denominator among them.

Somehow, in groups, people feel less ownership of actions and outcome and are more willing to allow terrible things to happen.

When we see this sort of thing happen and we ask members of a group about it, they will sometimes say “I didn’t think it was my place to go against the group. I figured someone else was in charge.”

In essence, we abdicate our individual moral authority when we act in groups. Mobs are much easier to control than individuals. Individuals are capable of critical thinking. Mobs respond as a mass, fed by a feedback cycle of energy that can take on a life of its own.

We are faced with a part of our society – our neighbors and friends and coworkers – who have decided that there are some folks whom it is acceptable to hurt.

People who are identified as “other,” and considered to be somehow less human, or less deserving, do not require the kind of humane treatment we afford those who are like ourselves.

No person is illegal.

No child is illegitimate.

No family should be separated at the border.

No child should be in a cage. (NO adult should be in a cage, either.)

No human deserves to be abused.

No human deserves to be hungry.

No human deserves to be unhoused.

No human deserves to be sick and unable to get medical care. – not just affordable medical care, but medical care. All medical care should be free. Better treatment should not be something you can get only if you have enough money. If the care you get for free is insufficient, then improve the free care for all so that it is available to all.

The Republican party has morphed into something that would make Abraham Lincoln recoil in disgust. It has become a place where politicians become popular by hurting the right people. At present, those who are safe – or even popular – to hurt are those in the LGBTQ+ community, particularly transgender children.

Black people have always been convenient and popular targets for conservatives. As are Latinos and immigrants from all over the world. Perversely, Native Americans are an approved target for this bunch of nativist ideologues.

People with disabilities are dismissed and discounted. People with mental health challenges are dismissed as unhuman until a white person shoots up a school or a bar or a shopping center or a concert, and then the shooter is described as “confused,” or “mentally ill.” As opposed to hateful and deluded.

Our chance to push back against this rise of fascism happens on Tuesday. This will likely be our only real, tangible chance to have a lasting effect.

The choices before us are of deep moral consequence.

We must choose between candidates who think healthcare is a human right and those who prefer a capitalist approach that leaves those without money sick and without care.

We must choose between candidates who think that people with uteruses should be allowed to control their bodies and their reproductive decisions and those who would force fourth-graders to carry their rapist's pregnancy to term.

We must choose between those who understand that climate change is real and those who would prefer to deny that truth because to acknowledge it requires action and discomfort.

We must choose between those who seek to free those wrongfully imprisoned and those who think it is appropriate for the state to kill people as punishment.

We must choose between those who want to care for senior citizens and those who want to eliminate social security.

We must choose between those who want to fully fund schools and those who want to cut lunch programs for hungry kids.

We must choose between those who think it is ok to put children in cages and those who think immigrants and refugees should be treated with compassion and welcome.

The choices before us are stark. I do not see any gray area in these contests.

Our faith calls for us to value the inherent worth and dignity of all people. It calls us to act with justice, equity and compassion in human relations, it calls us to exercise our right of conscience and the use of the democratic process, both within and beyond our congregations, and it urges us to build a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Nowhere in our values does it say we get to be mean to people.

Nowhere in our values are we encouraged to sit back and let others do the heavy lifting.

Nowhere in our values does it say we get to isolate in our comfort and hope the rest of the world works its problems out without us.

We are all connected. To each other in this room, to our neighbors who live near us, to the people we see in the grocery store, to the people we see at work or in school, to the people who represent us in Harrisburg and in Washington. We are all connected. What affects one affects us all. Harm done to one is harm done to all.

People are complex. We are imperfect and prone to making mistakes and bad decisions.

Yet, when we know better, we must do better.

Whatever we may have thought or believed in the past, we must make decisions today based on what we know as truth today.

That all people deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.
That we are called to advocate for those who are marginalized.
That we are called to dismantle the system that unfairly benefits some and hurts others, even if we are the ones it benefits.

Next week, we will gather once more to deal with what has been wrought in this election cycle. I predict that it will be neither all good nor all bad, and that we will all be a bit exhausted.

But we will gather. Because that is how we get meaning in our world, by connecting and remembering that we are not alone. We are in this together.

Blessed be. Amen.