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Democracy: A Post-Election Sermon MLB

Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here

to worship, by which we bind our lives

to a way of life deeper than disappointment,

and far greater than any gift or grace;

a way vulnerable to the stunning red of sunrise,

yet also open to the sadness of the marginalized.

And so we begin our worship this way:

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and hope of peace.

Sequence 11 AM

It's hot in Calcutta, India right now. Steamy. Rajeesh Panikkar walks home from his afternoon job at the bakery. The streetlights blur in his tired eyes. He can't wait to get to sleep. He wonders, as he stumbles home, how the election went yesterday down at the Union Hall. In the distance, he hears the rumble of the night train from Patna.

The spring rain just stopped now in Christchurch, New Zealand. Alan Roberts is taking a few days off from school in Dunedin, and staying with a friend in town. He is suddenly awake...was he dreaming? He looks out the window and sees Alpha Centauri winking at him from the coal black sky. The sound of a freight train rumbling past nearby reminds him of sounds from his home back in

Akron. He wonders what his sister Celine, back in the States, is doing right now.

The early morning sun is now silvering the eastern sky in Calgary, and painting the towers there a faint pink. Hiram Rasmussen is at the light-rail barn nice and early, sorting out his tools. He wonders when his daughter, who's going to school in London, Ontario, will get his sad letter about Aunt Greta.

In Valparaiso, the sun shines down now on the hills and clanking cable-cars. Victoria Allende Montt is walking home from church, where the priest's sermon this morning made her angry. She does not agree with his opinion on divorce...especially not after Benito's continuous romance with cheap scotch.

In Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast, Rene Pellegrini and his wife and children are now worrying about the renewed violence up north. Rene is also worrying, more specifically, about his secretary's mother, who left yesterday on the train to Bouake, to visit family up in the now very dangerous rebel territory..

In Amsterdam, Pieter Van Leiden and Jerome Chang go to dinner at that tony South African place just a few blocks away from the Rijkmuseum. They hold hands past the low candleholders on the table, talking about the strange e-mail they got from their friends Sandy and Evan from Ohio. The rumble from the deep metro below them interrupts their conversation.

Praise to you, O Love, for this voyage on the Train of the Spirit of Life, where all passengers are born intrinsically equal in worth and dignity. Let my silence signal my willingness to ride on such a train for the rest of my life.

silence

On the Train of the Spirit of Life, there are rich and poor,
old and young, gay and straight, and a rainbow of colors
and cultures. And all lives connect to us on this train...those we love
easy and those we find difficult to love. Those who are fearful and those
who are courageous. Those who are alike and those who are different.
We embrace other passengers on this train of life to whom we relate
with depth and care by naming them inside our hearts, or naming them
aloud into the common air.

naming

The Train of the Spirit of Life is a gospel train...that is,
it is a train that brings the good news: that there must be,
and always must be, seats for everyone, without exception. Sound your
whistle, train. Move on...

Readings:

The First Reading *this morning is a poem from
the Kenyon Review, by Theresa Daniels, written just last year.*

That the End Could Be Beginning

No less startling than the bush,
flaming but unharmed,
by which Moses drew, silenced,
is the tree that, without ceremony, makes
its fiery offering.

And the fruit-bearers, tandem,
nearly vulgar, urge to their extremities

the best of what's within them—Bounty,

as if for apology, mercy, and questioning,
for what am I guilty?

About me the wind dismantles the rattle of pod, berry, and cone. And
my gourd of worth is emptied,

Our difference becomes covenant. That
the end could be beginning is the first question.

The Second Reading *is a poem by the Chilean Nobel Laureate, Pablo Neruda written in 1950.*

América, no invoco tu nombre en vano

América, no invoco tu nombre en vano.
Cuando sujeto al Corazón la espada,
cuando aguanto en el alma la gotera,
cuando por las ventanas
un Nuevo día tuyo me penetra,
soy y estoy en la luz que me produce,
vivo en la sombra que me determina,
duermo y despierto en tu esencial aurora:
dulce como las uvas, y terrible,
conductor del azúcar y el castigo,
empapado en esperma de tu especie,
amamantado en sangre de tu herencia

America, I Do Not Call Your Name without Hope

America, I do not call your name without hope
When I hold my sword against my heart,
when I live with a leak in my soul;
when one of your new days
pierces me as it comes through the windows,

I am. And I stand in the light that produces me.
I live in the darkness which makes me what I am,
I sleep and awake in your fundamental sunrise:
as mild as grapes, and terrible,
carrier of sugar and the whip,
soaked in the seed of your species,
nursed on the blood of your inheritance.

Sermon

Since the election is over now,
and hard feelings are running deep in many people,
and since passions sometimes eclipse the understanding,
I want to speak so clearly that no one can easily
mistake my words. Hear me.

I am *not* a political analyst.

I am *not* the voice of everyone in this congregation.

I am *not* a social science professor, with statistics.

I am *not* an expert on a great many things.

I *am* an American citizen who lives in Central Ohio.

I *am* a voter, and have never missed an election,
since I first voted over three decades ago.

I *am* a gay man of Emilian Italian descent who finds
the word “religious” to be very useful, despite
some of the negative associations that stick to it like burrs. I *voted* this
week, and have always voted, in support of deeply held moral and
ethical values.

I am son, and godfather, and brother, and mentor and cousin, and friend,
and student in the school of hard knocks, and perpetual mourner.

I am by vocation a *parish* minister in the Unitarian
Universalist living tradition, and, by avocation,
a lover of travel and an artist. And I’m a storyteller.

And that is how I must proceed this morning. With a story. It’s the story
of my conversation with a woman who lives in the Miranova building.
We were standing in line to vote, she and I. This was down at Nazareth

Towers, on Rich Street and Grant. The line was so long it took us two and a half hours, mid-morning, to get into the actual voting room! And I know now that the lines at Nazareth Towers were hardly the longest lines in the city of Columbus. All day I saw lines that snaked around the block at several sites, with umbrellas sheltering the determined voters from the rain.

We never exchanged names, this woman and I. We never talked explicitly about who we were going to vote for, or what issues or levies we favored or did not favor.

But, I learned that she and I were the same age when she started the conversation “You know, I am in my mid-fifties, and I have never stood in line for any other election *in my whole life.*”

“Me either,” I said. “In fact, this turn-out is so amazing it makes me almost giddy!”

“Me too!” she agreed. “So much passion this election!”

So she and I waited for hours, but with a kind of growing excitement in our hearts. (It was only later that we found out that many Columbus voting booths had been taken to the suburbs, and that many urban people were thus disenfranchised from the vote, because they could not take so many hours off work, or pay that much to a baby-sitter.)

I asked her about her beautiful brooch. She had bought it on a trip overseas. Soon, we started sharing travel stories, and it was clear that she and I both relish our sweet opportunities to travel. We agreed that travelling abroad has provided us some of the finest education we ever received in our lives.

“This long line certainly reminds me of my trip down to Chile,” I told her. “I was so amazed, while I was there on my sabbatical, by the passion of the political life down there. Wednesday night, or Sunday

evening, no matter, the streets were crowded with cars or busses taking people to their weekly political meetings. And I was amazed by how many political parties there are in Chile: on the left, in the center and to the right. If I remember correctly, there's some sort of Humanist Party, then there's the Party for Democracy, which my goddaughter's parents belong to, and the Christian Democrat Party. Of course, there is also some kind of Communist Party, a Socialist Party, the South Party, (whatever that means) some sort of Renewal Party, a Green Party, and some sort of Radical Social Democratic Party. And I seem to remember there's something called the Progressive Center Union Party, which is not at all progressive, despite the title. I seem to remember its *very* right-wing. But no matter the party, people attend party meetings with a passion. In fact, these frequent party meetings are so central to Chilean political life that my friends Bonni and Ignacio actually took off one night to attend their weekly party meeting *even when they were expecting some friends to arrive at any minute for supper*. And these friends, they informed me, were Chilean friends who had just flown in, all the way from Burkino Faso in Africa. Bonni and Ignacio left me to entertain their jet-lagged guests with my smithereens Spanish till they came home. It was quite an interesting night."

"I bet," she said. "I've heard about Chile's vibrant political life from other people" she continued. "That they have so many political parties, and that they find it all so important.

"And it's not just *important* to their hearts," I said. They actually *know* things about the political world. They were constantly bringing up local issues and national issues, and they always spoke of them knowledgeably. In fact, when Bonni, Ignacio, my goddaughter Andrea and their African house-guests finally sat down that night and ate supper at 10 PM, the usual supper hour down there, they talked of nothing *but* politics. They discussed the political trends in Mozambique, and spoke of African statesmen Kenneth Kaunda, and Leopold Senghor as if they were friends. They distinguished between various kinds of socialism and diverse forms of African federalism. They even let loose about Ann

Richards in Texas and Mario Cuomo in New York, about whom they knew a lot more than I did. I, of course, just sat there silent as a stone, ashamed that I was unable to even think of the name of the president of the country in which I was sitting at the time. Unfortunately, I'm probably much more typical of North Americans than not, in this regard. I don't think many of us are up on political things."

"However, that might be why so many people vote down there, percentage-wise," the woman said. "They actually know things and want to use that knowledge for the common good. I can only hope that something like that is happening here today. Maybe this long line is a sign that things are changing here in the States. Maybe we are about to become more democratic, like the Chileans."

She smiled.

"Yes," I agreed, "this line is certainly unlike anything I've known before. Bonni told me that a good 90% of the eligible Chilean people vote in each and every election. Of course, it doesn't hurt that they hold their elections on Sundays, when fewer people are working, and it also helps that they close all the liquor stores on voting day. They do get fined if they don't vote, but that is only if they register, and they are NOT required to register, so the percentage really is pretty impressive. In this country, if you get 50% of just the registered people to vote, you think you have done well, and that is often a lot less than half of all the possible voters. And even if this election tops 117,500,000 voters, which people are predicting, that still means a whole 117,000,000 million other people are *not* voting, which is around half of the entire adult population. That's *not* a very good example of real democracy, as far as I am concerned. I remember that Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister from the 19th century, (and I did introduce myself as a Unitarian Universalist minister at that point) once said something that President Lincoln eventually borrowed. He said the American ideal was "a government of *all* the people, by *all* the people, and for *all* the people." Lincoln dropped the "all" when he quoted it, but I think the *all* is

important. The more people that get involved in politics, the more of an ideal American democracy you have.”

“Boy, I sure agree about that,” she said, nodding her head. “The more, the better. I think all of the Move-On folks, and groups like them, that got people all excited, via E mail, really *are* making a difference in this election. I think a lot of these people are finally getting charged with the privilege of the whole thing.” She paused, then said: People are finally getting at that every opportunity to vote, to get involved, to walk the precincts is a beautiful, exciting and central thing in any real democracy. Maybe people are beginning to learn that democracy doesn’t mean getting out of bed early one Tuesday in November every four years, or even every two years. Maybe they are beginning to catch on that North America can only be faithful to its vision when it acts like the South Americans do...by getting involved, not just three months before an election, but three *years* before an election. Start engaging with others early. Get all the facts down. Check the machines, see if they work and if there are enough of them. Analyze possible strategies. Do the research. Engage with others politically. Unless we do that, then America’s future is just being decided by the few. And even this election will hardly be a landslide, no matter who wins. After all, *half* the people can’t possibly be construed as *all* the people, right?”

“Absolutely right,” I said. “You know, they knew down there in Chile that our sense of democratic practice up here is pretty weak, compared to many other countries. ‘Cause, when people down there got to know me, they got bold enough to ask me, ‘Why do you North Americans think you are a democracy when so few of you vote, even in your presidential elections?’ Of course, I had no answer I could make that didn’t seem like I was floundering or making excuses. So I just said, ‘I wish I knew. I wish I knew.’”

“Well, of course they asked you that question. You are a North American. You are part of the nation that messed up their whole system down there, a mess from which they’re still recovering. They wanted to

remind you that it was pretty rude of you to export your form of democracy, when it wasn't all that good to begin with. At least, that's what I think."

"Yeah, all that Pinochet nonsense, right?" I asked.

"Yep, did a paper on him once. Back in the 70's, President Nixon ordered Henry Kissinger (who has yet to be tried for war crimes, unfortunately), and some CIA operatives, to try and assassinate Salvador Allende, the duly elected president of Chile, because we didn't like his politics. It didn't work out exactly how they hoped, but Allende did indeed die in an USA orchestrated and funded coup. And once he was eliminated, and Augusto Pinochet's military coup succeeded, supported by North American big bucks, democracy in Chile went to hell. After hundreds of years of no civil wars, no uprisings, and a good constitutional democratic system, our nation shamefully helped to destroy their beautiful democracy for almost 17 years. You were not even allowed to criticize Pinochet during his reign of terror. Leftist political parties were not permitted to exist."

"I knew some of that story but not all of it. I certainly heard Bonni and Ignacio grumble about Pinochet's legacy many times."

"But despite the power of that legacy," she continued, "and as with South Africa, democratic Chileans won their democracy back. Without a bloody revolution, they managed to reclaim their way of life. And I'd just bet that when you lose your democratic life for a while, you'll sure as hell guard it and keep it like a precious jewel from that time on. That's probably why you saw such passion for the political life down there. They actually don't take it for granted, like we tend to do...they count it a great and even inestimable honor."

"Boy is that right," I said. "They know first hand that democracy is fragile, not strong. It has to be supported, day in day out, and watched and kept by people who care. You know, Chile has a left and a right, just

like we do, as well as lots of folks in between. They have their religious fanatics and their secularists, just like we do. But, they understand the idea of covenant...that if you want *all* the people to participate, then you have to agree *to engage and stay engaged*. You have to agree not to let cynicism, because of voter fraud, tampered machines, swaggering winners and other forms of disenfranchisement, get you down and discourage you. When human beings are involved, you have to *expect* less than honest behavior. You can't be surprised by it, or holier-than-thou about it. You just have to name it, and call people on it over and over. You have to be vigilant about it, and not be mad that you have to *stay* vigilant about things so unglamorous as voter registration and proper and sufficient voting equipment with a clear paper trail. You know, I talked to my goddaughter in Chile last night. They just had a mayoral election down there, and she and a number of other election watchers had to get local cops to throw out a bunch of right-wingers who were actually trying to buy the votes of some of the poorer peasants with bills amounting to some 8000 pesos. That's about five bucks, I think."

"Wow," she said, "that's awful."

"Anyway, it seems to me that if nations don't value the idea of covenant as basic, we're in trouble. I see covenant, or mutual promises, as a visible expression of hope itself, nothing less. If nations like the US or Chile don't think promising to stay engaged even when the differences are great means anything, then the end of life as we know it could be beginning; the end of vision, the end of hope, and the end of the American dream. In that case, the only other choice remaining is for the left to simply wipe out the right, and the right to wipe out the left, and both of them to join to wipe out the middle, and that's the end of everything, isn't it?"

"Well," I said, "in this case, I would hope not that the end is beginning, but that it's *a* new beginning. A sort of new American Revolution. Like in Chile after Pinochet. The present president of Chile, Ricardo Lagos, is

actually a Socialist, the exact opposite of Pinochet. How amazing is that? And he is doing quite well.” I paused a second.

“You know. It’s funny. When I was down there, I would call myself an American and they would say, ‘We’re American too. You come from North America, we come from South America. But both of us are Americans. It’s not our fault that your language is so poor it doesn’t have an adjective that means *United Statesian*.’ ”

“Yes, I have noticed that you have been carefully choosing your language, and never just saying America without saying either North or South.”

“Yeah, I learned that down there. I learned how parochial we North Americans can be, assuming that we are the center of the world, and that everything revolves around us. We could learn a lot from those other Americans down there. Like them, we have known violence and disappointment during our years. We had a civil war, and urban uprisings and the McCarthy era. Like them, we have known a great deal of abundance. Chile is a rich and beautiful land. They know they have great bounty down there too. And they use cornucopias down there during their autumn like we do up here to express their abundance...gourds, pumpkins, cones etc. But unlike them, we don’t have democracy quite as well down yet. We are still learning. And in these last two months, I think we have learned a lot, especially the liberals among us.”

“I agree,” she said. “We *have* learned a lot. I’ve done more election work in the last three weeks than I have done in my life. I have made phone calls, sent emails, walked precincts. It’s been amazing. It’s given me such hope. I don’t know what the outcome will be in this election, and I know the stakes are high, because of the Supreme Court and all that, but the process itself has renewed my hope in the possibility of America.”

“Ah,” I said, “the possibility of America.” We were quiet a moment, then I said:

“You know what, no matter which way the election goes, I am thinking of reading this poem by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda at the service on Sunday. You wanna hear it? I’d love to get your take on it after our conversation.”

“Sure,” she said. “What, you have it with you?”

“Yeah, I’ve been mulling over several possible readings, and I have a few of them in my pocket. I was going to read them over in line and make a decision, but I’ve enjoyed talking with you more. Here it is.”

As I unfolded the papers I had crunched into my back pocket, I talked about my time in Santiago.

“I love Neruda,” I offered. “When I was in Santiago de Chile, I went to his beautiful blue house over in the jazz district, and rubbed my body along the walls, hoping a few Neruda molecules would attach to me as a blessing.”

“Really? Boy, you sure have an interesting way of relating to the world!” she said, chuckling. “Let me hear the poem. In English, right? I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Neither do I, regrettably. Here it is.”

America, I do not call your name without hope
When I hold my sword against my heart,
when I live with a leak in my soul;
when one of your new days
pierces me as it comes through the windows,
I am. And I stand in the light that produces me.
I live in the darkness which makes me what I am,

I sleep and awake in your fundamental sunrise:
as mild as grapes, and terrible,
carrier of sugar and the whip,
soaked in the seed of your species,
nursed on the blood of your inheritance.

“Wow,” she said, “that was beautiful. Don’t know his work enough to say much. Lots of strange images, the sugar and the whip, the blood and the seed...”

“Yeah, there has been a lot of that in North American history,” I said, “the terrible whip of the slave-owners, and the yet the sweet grapes of our rich abundance.”

“What I like most about the poem is the whole take on hope. What lovely images...when I feel sad, like having a leak in my soul, or when I am angry, like holding a sword over my heart, I am *still* an American. The light shines through the window of my life, and the darkness floods in too, and yet no matter, this is my home, with both the ups and the downs, the fear and the love, the light and the shadow. I like it. It’s a good poem, I think, although I am no expert. What’s that first line again? I liked it the best.”

“America, I do not call your name without hope.”

Offering

*To uphold a shelter for a liberal religious vision
in a world where neither liberalism is esteemed on
the right, nor religion on the left, we offer a time
in each service for members and friends to offer a*

*portion of their promised pledges, so that our
great center of deep discourse might be sustained,
not at the edge of things, but at the center of them.
The morning offering will now be received and given.*

Visionprayer

Behold, my vision fades not.

What gleamed in my eyes before this week

still shines there like noon sun on a silver dish, untarnished.

Blest, not blamed, are the poor, said Jesus and it's still true. We are *all* in this together. Even if people are divided, the planet is still just one. And we have to share it. Still true. Love and affection are moral and good, between those who freely and mutually choose such love and affection. Still true. Freedom is both the way and the goal. Still true. Any war, whatever the reason it is fought, will always cause the death of innocents, whose loved ones cannot possibly be blest by their deaths, losses which only confirm them in their rage and desire for revenge. Still true, as far as I am concerned. Nothing is simple, interpreting the scriptures is not simple, living one's faith is not simple, getting to the truth is not simple. All, still true. Choices we make about some important things are difficult, and sometimes may not be wholly satisfying. Still true. Access to participation and power must never be banned, disenfranchisement is morally wrong. Still true.

Beauty has a thousand forms, but ignorance is usually singularly ugly.

Still true. Blest are You, Truth, our means and our end, for vision perishes never, but guides us in tough times and good times, and works to restore healing and illumination in every human heart. Amen.

Sequence 9 AM

It's hot in Calcutta, India right now. Steamy. Rajeesh Panikkar walks home from his afternoon job at the bakery. The streetlights blur in his tired eyes. He can't wait to get to sleep. He wonders, as he stumbles

home how the election went yesterday down at the Union Hall. In the distance, he hears the splash of rapid current down at the Hooghly River.

The spring rain just stopped now in Christchurch, New Zealand. Alan Roberts is taking a few days off school in Dunedin and staying with a friend in town. He is suddenly awake...was he dreaming? He looks out the window and sees Alpha Centauri winking at him from the coal black sky. The quiet current of the Waimakariri River soothes him to sleep. As he dozes off, he wonders what his sister Celine back in the States is doing right now.

The early morning sun is now silvering the eastern sky in Calgary, and painting the towers there a faint pink. Hiram Rasmussen is at the light-rail barn nice and early, sorting out his tools. He wonders if they have fixed that switching problem at the station near the rapids of the Bow River, and looks through the night-log for an entry.

In Valparaiso, the sun shines down now on the hills and clanking cable-cars, and glances brightly off the slow waters of the Aconcagua River. Victoria Allende Montt is walking home from church, where the priest's sermon this morning made her angry. She does not agree with his opinion on divorce...especially not after Benito's continuous romance with cheap scotch.

In Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast, Rene Pellegrini and his wife and children taking a "before-curfew" evening stroll along the muddy waters of the Bandama River. They are now worrying about the renewed violence up north. Rene is also worrying, more specifically, about his secretary's mother, who left yesterday to visit her family in Bouake, way up in rebel territory which now had become so terribly dangerous.

In Amsterdam, Pieter Van Leiden and Jerome Chang go to dinner at that tony South African place just a few blocks away from the Rijkmuseum. They hold hands past the low candleholders on the table, talking

about the strange e-mail they got from their friends Sandy and Evan from Ohio. After supper, they plan to visit their friends Tom and Muhammed along the North Sea Canal, a powerful river tamed by human ingenuity.

Praise to you, O Love, for this voyage on the River of Life, where all who visit its waters are born intrinsically equal in worth and dignity. Let my silence signal my willingness to follow such a river for the rest of my life.

silence

Dipping their feet into the River of the Spirit of Life, there are rich and poor, old and middle-aged and young, gay and bi and straight and people of many genders, and a rainbow of colors and cultures. And all lives are touched by the same waters ...those loved and those difficult to love. Those who are fearful and those who are courageous. Those who are alike, and those who are different. We embrace others who sail the River of life to whom we relate with depth and care by naming them inside our hearts, or naming them aloud into the common air.

naming

The River of the Spirit of Life is a place where all people, no matter what burdens they carry within them, might gather. Shall we go for a time?

Anthem “Shall We Gather At the River”