

The necessity of Christ for his Christians, post-election

Colleagues,

I foist on you some thoughts that have either screamed or simmered in my head through the hours since Tuesday. If you voted for Mr. Trump, there is much you will not like. Those who voted for Mrs. Clinton may also object along the way. Still, that you're reading this at all presumes a common loyalty to Christ our Lord, and a common interest in sharing his benefits with fellow sinners. So hang in there if you can with this sinner as I pick my six-step way toward that goal. We will all need to be thinking, praying, and perhaps preaching about this very thing when Sunday rolls around. For the record, I thought long and hard about toning down the rhetoric and emotion that you'll encounter here. I decided not to. It testifies to a reality that all of us are dealing in these hard, tough days. *Kyrie eleison.*

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1. The Morning-After Scream

He won. My jaw hits the keyboard as I write this. The citizens of my country have just picked a pig to be the next president of the United States. I dare to call this a judicious assessment. It rests on facts that we the people have been witnessing over eighteen terrible months. The man wallows in sin. He does it with glee. There is not a commandment he has failed to violate over the course of his campaign. We have all heard and seen it. i) He doesn't fear God. ii) He wears the Christian name lightly, gingerly—and mocks what it stands for (e.g. “turn the other cheek”; “love your enemies,” as we heard from Christ himself

last Sunday). iii) He ignores the Sabbath. iv) He doesn't render to Caesar ("because I'm smart!"). v) He foments hatred. vi) He revels in sexual aggression. vii) He cheats the unfortunates who do business with him. viii) He slanders others with relish; he assaults truth as a matter of course. ix) He covets adulation, to say nothing x) of his neighbor's wife.

He does all this openly, without the slightest hint of shame. That's what makes him so abhorrent. Shamelessness is the hallmark of the person who fancies himself to be a god, beyond the reach of anything others might have to say about right or wrong, good or evil. The god makes the rules. The god does as the god pleases. The rest of you tiny creatures will bend the knee, or else.

And people I know, people I cherish, voted for this man. Among them are some I preach the Gospel to every Sunday.

2. Our Christian Embarrassment

I don't get these baptized, Christ-confessing people who sided with Trump. I'm pretty sure they don't get me. Even of you, a few, perhaps, will want to write me off as another knee-jerk ELCA liberal, now whining as liberals are wont to whine. I am not that. My loathing of the man began as a visceral and quite conservative reaction to his personality. It festered as I watched his performance in the early debates among the 15 plus Republican candidates. Of all who spoke, none were more devoid of thoughtful substance. None were quicker to insult. None were less respectful of the basic rules that govern decent conversation. No one bragged as Trump bragged. No one matched the brio with which he spouted mean plans and vile promises. He was the worst of middle-school bullies somehow transposed into a 70 year-old body and planted on a platform where only grown-ups belong. The grown-ups I know were embarrassed to see him there.

I have yet to meet the Christian parent who would let their seventh-grader evince the attitudes and behavior that we saw on that stage. If I had ever caught one of my boys crowing allusively in public about the size of his penis, I would have sent him to his room for a week. So too with you, I imagine. Yet this man got away with it. And today we are all forced to know him as our president-elect. The American who writes this cringes with embarrassment.

And those dear Christian people, the ones I know and cherish, abetted this shame when they voted for him. I ache to spill with anger about that. What holds me back is the fact of knowing them as I do. They are good. They are decent. They are generous. When together we break bread. We crack jokes. We pray and sing in unison. I like them a lot. Still, they voted for Trump. For the life of me, I just don't get it. I think I am more embarrassed about that today than anything else. How do you love your neighbor well when you can't begin to understand her?

For the record, I suspect that my embarrassment is shared by lots of these dear people, only in reverse. They can't begin to guess how, as they intuit, their friend or pastor could have voted for Hillary. For my part, that only increases the mortification. I don't get Hillary hatred. I fail to see how anybody could have thought that Mrs. Clinton, for all her reported flaws, was the worse choice. If nothing else, the woman is capable of compassion. There are clear, bright streaks of it in her record as a public servant. In the other guy's record as a businessmen and entertainer, there is none of it at all.

But isn't compassion among the highest of traits that God requires of any human being, to say nothing of a leader? Holy Writ is clear on this. So now the floodgate cracks and the sinner's anger starts to spill—not so much at the dear ones I know as at the Christian scoundrels I do not know: the Graham,

the Dobson, the Falwell, Jr., the Ralph Reed. The host of self-righteous big name pastors waving Bibles in the air to urge a vote for the vindictive adulterer. Had they no shame as they desecrated the name of Christ? They have certainly tarred the rest of us with shame, obliging us to cringe in the company of secular friends. "Oh, you're a Christian? One of *those* people?" End of conversation. End of opportunity to speak of God as one for others to trust and hope in. Thank God, I say, for those voices in that conservative, evangelical bloc who dared to demur. But they too are writhing with embarrassment today, or so I should think. And so embarrassing, also for them, is to find our Christian selves so profoundly at odds, so unable to fathom how the other could have voted the way he or she did.

3. Of Whom Shall We Be Afraid? (Part A)

So is God embarrassed by God's Christians today? If so, God isn't saying. He never does. What we ought to imagine is something more fearful, that God is somehow driving our present embarrassment. Jeremiah would remind us of his record for doing such things. If Nebuchadnezzar does not pop up from nowhere, then neither does Trump. Neither does Hillary, for those of you loathe her.

We will spend the next two years reading analyses of what happened on Tuesday. Most all of it will be guesswork, in some cases intelligent, in others not so much. The mere speck I've caught so far—in my grief I've avoided the news these past two days—comes from the left, with a tale about angry, racist, working-class white men as the culprits in chief. I'm not buying that. It doesn't square with those dear ones I know and cherish. Something else was driving their votes. Of my Facebook friends, the ones most eager to tout Trump in recent months have been women. Aside from their politics, I tend to respect them.

The right will have its own interpretive tropes, equally simplistic, equally wrong. What these are I don't plan quickly to find out. Doubtless I should. Wise ones urge us to know our enemies. Wiser ones will tell us to know ourselves. None of us, of course, is eager to do that.

So let's suppose that God is using this election to force that knowledge on us, increasing our shame in the process. I will hazard two weak and wild guesses as to how that might happen. One aims at the right, the other at the left. Pretensions to divinity are the target in both cases.

Two years ago a billionaire named Nick Hanauer published an online article entitled "[The Pitchforks are Coming...For Us Plutocrats](#)." He warned that the obscene concentration of wealth in the hands of a few over the last few years is bound to spark a reaction. Who can doubt that the sparks have been flying in recent months? Indebted students flocked to Bernie Sanders' campaign, indebted parents to Donald Trump's. That the latter picked a greedy plutocrat as champion is ironic in the extreme. Might it also be deliberate where the hand of God is concerned? When tax rates on the wealthy and support for the poor are both slashed, will the sparks not fly that much thicker? Might this be how the mighty get their long-deserved comeuppance? Those of us who know God's ways will want to stay tuned, with fear and trembling. My pension is at stake. Yours too, I'll bet. Both with and after that comes judgment.

Speaking of judgment, seats on the Supreme Court are suddenly at stake, and with it the haughtiness of the cultural elite. Christians on the left seem often unaware of their participation in that. I'm still sufficiently in the middle to sense how it can sting. There is something obnoxious and altogether unneighborly in the assumption that once a narrow Court majority has weighed in on an issue, however controversial, the yahoos on

the losing side should shut up and get over it. That will not and cannot happen when the yahoos turn out instead to be thoughtful people with large hearts and deep convictions that the will of God is at stake in the issue at hand. Those dear ones of mine who voted for the other guy are surely among them. Again, how they could imagine that someone of this man's character and habits would drive a "pro-life" agenda, I cannot fathom. Still, when I watched the third debate and heard Mrs. Clinton robustly defend a woman's "right to choose" for the entire length of a pregnancy, I had an inkling that she had just lost a ton of votes. I may well be wrong about that. My friends on the left are even more wrong if they imagine that abortion either has or should have gone away as an issue that spurs people to vote Republican. So too with "marriage equality," to use the current euphemism. Quite aside from the merits of the arguments themselves, to speak with Olympian condescension about honest opponents of these things is another way of calling in the pitchforks; and where such condescension is in play, one should always assume that the hand on the biggest pitchfork of them all belongs to God. God loathes Olympian pretenders, as he time and again makes plain. One of his favored ways of dealing with them is to ramp up their embarrassment. Yes, let us tremble.

4. Of Whom Shall We Be Afraid? (Part B)

Still, in the middle of all this we in the Church have Gospel to hear, tell and share. God grant in these days that each of us will do it well.

We might, for example, start talking this Sunday about the strange and embarrassing God who has inexplicably voted for us, not once, but over and over and over again. Tellingly, the theologians' fancy word for this great Biblical theme is "election."

God picks people. Embarrassed and embarrassing people. Of immoral pigs, who is the greater, Jacob or David? Yet both are key bearers of the promise. The promise is this, that once God latches onto a pig in love, he will not let it go. So too with the other denizens of the sty. Judah may be a mess, with fat cats lounging on their beds of ivory as the economy crashes and the poor starve. That doesn't keep God from comforting these people with the great visions of Isaiah. We who dwell in the American sty will also get to hear these things in a couple of weeks.

Meanwhile this Sunday we will all meet Christ in Word and Sacrament. "Behold the Embarrassment," to crib from Pilate. Here is the One dispatched by God to enact the story we heard him spin some weeks ago, about the wretch of a son who heads for the far country to squander the father's wealth with human pigs, and to land in the sty where all pigs belong. In his case the sty has a cruciform shape. There hangs our God, draped in our shame and choking to death on our own consternation. Nowhere to be seen are disciples who, as we've been hearing in our current tour of Luke, have been embarrassing him every step of the way from Galilee to Jerusalem with their quarrels and their odious questions (cf. Lk. 9:54). Still, for their sake Jesus dies. That becomes plain in the astonishment of Easter, when God casts his final vote on the proposition of Christ-for-us by raising Jesus from the dead. The first people to hear the news are those embarrassing disciples. The first thing Jesus says to them is "Peace be with you." He also says, "Don't be afraid." After that he thrusts them into the enduring embarrassment of touting him as God's Gift and Hope for all people, in all circumstances, not least the ones that prevail in America today. He also gives them the Holy Spirit so they can tout with shameless joy.

5. Toward Christian Shamelessness

Come to think of it, shameless joy is the very thing I need most right now. So do those dear ones of mine, however they voted. So do you, including any of you who may have been badly scraped by things you waded through in the paragraphs above.

There is one place and one place only to find this otherwise impossible gift. Christ Jesus is his name.

“Peace be with you.” He says it again, and, in this moment, he says it directly to all of us who constitute this reading-and-writing community. On Sunday I will hear him say it again as I stand with all those dear ones who will constitute the assemblies I will serve as pastor.

I don’t expect that those dear ones will be talking politics this Sunday; or if they do, it will be in corners, sotto voce, with a wary eye cast for any within earshot who might disagree with their views. Conversations like this are always tainted with a whiff of embarrassment. We live in fear of the other’s critique, or worse, of his anger.

But this, of course, is the very point at which Christ emerges as the Best Gift Ever. The constant challenge is to use this gift—to grasp it by faith, as the old, familiar language has it. I look at you, you look at me, and what we get to see in each other is a person God voted for when he raised Jesus from the dead. This will be, at first blush, an embarrassing idea. I bumble, stumble, and grope my way as badly as anyone. So do you. I think thoughts and make the kind of choices that leave you speechless. You do it in turn. You will not appear to me at times to be the kind of person a righteous God could get behind. You’ll want to mutter similar thoughts about me when cornered with your friends. Yet here is Christ for both of us. And if Christ, then why not me for you and you for me, each bearing the burden of the other’s sins and follies, and not once, but over

and over, on a patiently enduring basis? Who knows, we might even learn how to be open and honest with the other about our political views without expecting, as sinners do, that the other will spin on her heel and stomp away.

Will Christians in America ever get around to embracing this faith in their relations with each other? The track record is not at all promising. What abides is the Promising One who refuses to give up on his dear ones, pigs though they be in their relations with each other. It has got to be so very embarrassing for him, that we are like this. Still, he's used to it. Dealing with embarrassment, his own as well as ours, is the very thing he lives for.

6. The Enduring Comfort

I don't mean in any of this to underplay the challenges I expect our country to face in the presidency of Donald Trump. His character is bound to shape not only the decisions he makes, but also the people he leads; and having no respect for his character, I can't begin to welcome what comes next. I can only pray that the God who works through sinners to conjure up huge and happy surprises will somehow surprise us all in these next four years.

Meanwhile we step into these years with the words of Christ ringing in our ears: "Don't be afraid." I tend often to focus too much on the eschatological dimension of those words. I could use some help in concentrating for now on their immediate import. Don't be afraid to love each other as I have loved you. Don't be afraid to let your light shine in a world that has a deep abiding thing for darkness. Don't be afraid to turn that cheek or to love that enemy, and to do it especially when things like these are out of fashion.

Don't be afraid to poke the haughty, or to succor the lowly. The

legend of Lawrence the Deacon comes suddenly to mind. He's the fellow who, when commanded by the prefect of Rome to hand over the church's treasure, distributed them instead to the poor, the lame, the blind, who he then ushered into the prefect's presence. "Here is the church's treasure," he said, whereupon he was promptly fried on a griddle. It is said that he died cracking a joke.

I will sing the praises of God this Sunday in the company of people who know their Lord and honor his love for every human being. Yes, they do that imperfectly. Why some of them will have voted for the other guy, I still do not get. But I will see them in action. They will love each other quietly. They will welcome strangers who wander in. They will pitch in with generosity to speed along whatever project we're working on to address the needs of neighbors. Some will write letters to congressional representatives. Others will pray for the welfare of the city and the nation. All will struggle to keep the faith we share in Christ, and to let it shape their lives. They will often rejoice in the Gospel. When they do, all embarrassment is gone.

I take it for granted it that scenes like this will keep playing out all over our country, wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, with Christ himself in their midst. Let this be enough for me to say of the years we face: "Bring them on!"

God plant such faith in all our hearts.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce