

Post Partum, Post Mortem. Now What?

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

November 9, 2008

A couple of things first:

1. Will all the same sex couples who got married this summer, please stand – if you wish - and let's all celebrate their love and commitment to each other.
2. Let me ask you all if we still stand on the side of love?
3. This Wednesday morning Christine Bender, John Blue and I are meeting with a Pasadena city official regarding their demand that we take down our banner. Should we take it down?
4. Do you think we can continue this struggle for equality, continue our commitment to the right to marry for all adults regardless of gender? Can we? Yes we can!

So there is good news and there is bad news.

The Rev Jeremiah Wright became famous in the last six months for a couple of sermons he delivered at his church on the South Side of Chicago. Wright spoke to ministers and other church workers two years ago at our General Assembly in Portland, OR. His church is a dynamic place, deeply involved in the community, and Wright, now retired was a dynamic and charismatic minister. He is highly educated, deeply intelligent and an excellent theologian. He was, as you know Barack Obama's minister. Obama's second book 'The Audacity of Hope' borrowed the title from a sermon of Wrights, and much of its tenor. Wright was an uncompromising advocate of faith as liberation; for him, freedom was the promise of faith, and that we needed to be audacious in our hope for freedom.

He also became famous for some stinging lines – very much in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and ministers in the US since its birth. Not God Bless America but God-damn America, he railed because of our squandering of our own promise and hope. Goddamn American.

So today, God bless America but Goddamn California!

Good news and bad news.

Like many of you, I am sure, I have been thinking about what happened on Tuesday in the election. I thought about the possibilities before and the actualities since. I have read too many opinions by now. I think I might never watch CNN again. I have wondered what I should say today depending on the various possibilities in outcomes.

And, like so many of you, the reaction is mixed, deeply mixed, deeply ambivalent. Joy and sorrow. Pride and shame. Pleasure and anger. Tears of joy and tears of sorrow.

I can't pretend to understand the range of emotions – what it must be for African Americans to see Barack Obama elected as president. We were at an election watch party where there were a number of African Americans. I happened to hear an elderly man say to another, soon after Obama was proclaimed the winner. 'Well, can you believe this? Now I can go to my rest.' There were many tears. I cannot imagine the feelings behind Jesse Jackson's tears:

Here is what Charles Blow of the NY Times wrote:
History will record this as the night the souls of black folk, living and dead, wept – and laughed, screamed and danced – releasing 400 years of pent up emotion.

They were the souls of those whose bodies littered the bottom of the Atlantic, whose families were torn asunder, whose names were erased.

They were those who knew the terror of being set upon by men with clubs, of being trapped in a torched house, of dangling at the end of a rough rope.

They were the souls of those who knew the humiliation of another person's spit trailing down their faces, of being treated like children well into their twilight years, of being derided and despised for the beauty God gave them.

They were also the tears of those for whom "Yes We Can, " Obama's campaign slogan, took on a broader, more profound meaning.

"Yes We Can" escape the prison of lowered expectations and the cycles of poor choices. "Yes We Can" rise above history and beyond hatred. "Yes We Can" ascend to Martin Luther King's mountain top and see the promised land where dreams are fulfilled, where the best man wins and where justice prevails.

During this election African-Americans, their hearts weary from disappointment, dared to hope and dream again. Tonight their dream has been realized.

Whether or not you agree with Barack Obama's politics, there is no denying that his election represents a seminal moment in the African-American narrative and a giant leap forward on the road to America's racial reconciliation.

In fact everyone, regardless of race, should feel free to shed a tear and be proud of how far our country has come.

And Judith Warner wrote:

Two images will forever stay in my mind to mark this epoch-breaking Election Day. One is that of Jesse Jackson's face, drenched in tears, in Chicago's Grant Park on Tuesday evening.

And the other is a photo that ran in The Times on Wednesday. In it, a black mother and daughter sit on the floor of a church in Harlem. The mother, Latrice Barnes, having heard of Obama's victory, is doubled up in tears; her daughter, Jasmine, five years old, is reaching a tentative hand up to soothe her. To me, she looks like the future, reaching out to heal the past.

It is, I suppose, in part a matter of temperament, whether one shouts or weeps at happy transformative moments. But I also think it's a matter of what has come before. The young people joyfully frolicking in front of the Bush White House never knew the universe whose passing was marked by Obama's victory and Jackson's tears.

This moment of triumph marks the end of such a long period of pain, of indignity and injustice for African-Americans. And for so many others of us, of the trampling and debasing of our most basic ideals, beliefs that we cherished every bit as deeply and passionately as those of the "values voters" around whose sensibilities we've had to tiptoe for the past 28 years.

The election brought the return of a country we'd lost for so long that it was almost forgotten under the accumulated scar tissue of accommodation and acceptance.

For me, this will be the enduring memory of election night 2008: One generation released its grief. The next looked up confusedly, eager to please and yet unable to comprehend just what the tears were about.

I can't fully understand, to be sure. White and male, privileged beyond almost all other groups, I have never had to wonder 'when?' or even 'If?' Just 150 years ago, Blacks were slaves, owned by people like me, and yet, on that runway in Chicago, Barack Obama, and his wife and best friend Michelle, their daughters Malia and Sasha – looking all the world like the very best of us and in us. I was lifted up and out of the past, carried along on a wave of hope. We can be better; we can change; we can be better.

There is saying going around that Rosa sat so that Martin could march so that Barack could run so that our children can fly.

So Tuesday night we celebrated. Not of course that racism has disappeared – there was a great moment during Comedy Central's elections special. Stephen Colbert asked Charles Ogletree, professor of Law at Harvard, who taught both Barack and Michelle Obama, if the election meant that racism was now over. Ogletree took his time and seemed to very seriously consider the question, then looked directly at Colbert and simply said 'No.'

Of course it isn't. But what a night.

And, of course, I cannot understand fully the feelings on Wednesday morning when we woke up to learn the Proposition 8 had likely passed by a narrow margin.

This was crushing. How could others feel they have the right to sit in judgment about love and relationship, or how could others so easily write discrimination into our state constitution? How could the Yes on 8 runs ads with such patently false claims about education and religious discrimination, thus violating one of their most sacred rules – not to lie or bear false witness – one of the Ten Commandments for God's sake [oops – can't take God's name in vain – sorry!].

These couples who married this summer – what better examples of human possibilities than they? We must have learned by now that discrimination is wrong. We must have learned that the whole history of freedom says that when we invite more people to take part in the institutions of our society that we all benefit. How long must justice wait? As Langston Hughes said:

I tire so of hearing people say,

Let things take their course.

Tomorrow is another day.

I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.

I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

So now what? The election is over. We won and we lost. What now?

The first is to stop blaming one thing or another – either blaming African American votes in CA, or the Mormons or the Catholics or evangelicals, or failures on the No Side for the wrong kind of ads and so on. This does not get us anywhere other than greater division. It is over. Let's look forward.

The point is not to prove others that they were and are wrong but to show that we are right. The point is to witness – I am talking deeds and not creeds here people [I almost said 'my friends' but I just can't say that anymore for a while at least].

Here are some suggestions for what we can do:

1. keep our banner up regardless of what the city says
2. I will continue to celebrate same sex marriages and use the language of marriage. I can no longer say 'and according to the laws of the State of California' but I can say according to the beliefs and traditions of this faith community, you are now married
3. Every heterosexual marriage I do will, again, include a statement about equality in marriage
4. Think about this: what if we insisted that every wedding performed on our property had to have a statement about the necessity of marriage equality. Regardless of who is doing the marriage or who is getting married. We generate a good bit of income from weddings, and this might be unacceptable to some who would rent our space, and might have a negative impact on our revenue. Should we do this? Or, is the revenue we get worth it to use in our on-going support of LGBT couples and families. Think about this – I am not sure what is best. Symbolic actions are often satisfying, but not always effective.

5. We rent space to Saint Monica's Academy – they are a very conservative and traditional Catholic school. I would bet a significant number of their families voted yes on 8. From the bumper stickers in the lot during the week, I am confident about that. What if several same sex families were willing to meet monthly with a couple of Saint Monica's families – I would moderate this – to talk about being a family and about the commitments we make to each other, seeking common ground. If anyone is interested, let me know and I will contact St. Monica's to see if anyone from that community would participate.

You see, the best way to move on is to move on and to demonstrate in all the ways we can the same sex couples and families are no different in any way from what are called traditional families. We know this to be true. But others might not.

Tip O'Neil once said that all politics are local, which is to say that they are personal. The more we interact the more tolerant we become, recent studies claim. Rather than yelling at those we disagree with, or separating ourselves from them, we should get closer.

In Obama's wonderful acceptance speech, as well as in his whole campaign, there was a deliberate use of the word 'we' rather than 'I.' This was impressive, and important. DeToqueville saw American individualism as our greatest strength and our most dangerous weakness. It has been our weakness of late. What's in it for me is our story line. This will get us nowhere in history, and we are in decline. I date it back to 1980 when Ronald Reagan asked the question; 'Are you better off now ...?' rather than are 'we better off ...' We slid further down the road of being consumers rather than becoming citizens. It is time to turn around.

And perhaps we have turned that disastrous journey around a little. Obama's victory is for us – for all of us – the sign that a greater 'we' has the opportunity to emerge. The victory of Prop 8 is a sign that the 'I' is still too strong, and that the 'we' must still become larger.

This is a time for the simple acts of witnessing, of the hard work of changing hearts one by one. We will continue with our symbolic acts – like our banner – but this is time for witnessing. And that witnessing that our faith shows a better way is grounded in hope, in the hope that is founded in our belief in the possibility of human goodness and truth; in the chance to grow and become a better people.

Obama said in Grant Park on Tuesday night: If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.

It's the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen; by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the very first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different; that their voice could be that difference.

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled - Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America.

It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.

And he concluded:

America, we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there is so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves - if our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?

This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time - to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth - that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: yes we can.

So yes we can. Yes we can look forward to the day when marriage equality is assured, when discrimination based on sexual orientation is rare and unusual. Yes we can, yes we can.

I want to tell you how much this congregation has changed me, and I believe for the better. In these past four years I have had the deep privilege of working with a group of people – the Neighborhood People of Color – as we have talked about race and diversity. They have pushed me and led me, and I am so very very grateful for that. They are kind and courageous people.

And I have had the privilege of working with and being with our LGBT members. And they have pushed me and led me, too, and I believe I am better for their being a part of my life. The weddings I did this summer – well, I would say I haven't had so much fun in 25 years of ministry. And that is true. Being a part of those weddings has meant more than I can possibly express. These are some of the finest people I have ever known and some of the finest relationships I have seen. And, damn it, I want to do more of those weddings! And I know we will because I believe: yes we can.

Melville – I have to bring Melville in – said that when you take God out of heaven and put him into the streets – where God belongs – you get to swearing so. So, goddamnit – I want to do weddings for all those who are in love and make that commitment to each other, and, goddamnit, we will. We will. I want to live in a country fueled by hope for justice and equality, practicing the disciplines of compassion and justice in our daily lives. Goddamnit – I want what our better angels lead us to; I want our hands to bend that arc towards justice and quality.

And we can do this – yes we can, yes, we can.