

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! *2 Corinthians 5:17*

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! *Galatians 6:15*

Anticipatory Grief

This weekend I managed to write my column earlier than usual. It was a nice history lesson about the Reformed tradition and the ways we engage in public life, including in the political sphere. In short, I encouraged everyone to vote.

I wasn't really settled on the column, so left it on my computer. And then I went to church yesterday morning, and the church was celebrating All Saints Sunday, when we remember loved ones who are gone from us physically, but who remain in our hearts. But I started to tear up, not from missing any individual, but it hit me that as we consider tomorrow's election, it is likely that half of us will be devastated by its results.

If polls are correct, this nation is evenly divided. But as I sat in church, it seemed that both sides have one thing in common—we are mourning the dream of America that we loved.

This election seems most consequential because it may make a definitive statement about the state of the nation. Half of us believe in the American Dream as it has been fulfilled for the past two centuries, and fear that this dream is being taken away from us, mostly by strangers who distort the image we have of our nation, or by those who willingly gave the dream to them. The other half believe in the dream of America where people of all kinds and backgrounds can find opportunity and peace; while we do not believe this dream has been realized, we fear that not only is the dream slipping away, but there are powers in our country who are aggressively ensuring that the dream never comes into focus.

So as we pray and fast and dream and fear about tomorrow, and whatever will come after tomorrow, we may be feeling anticipatory grief, as we prepare our emotions for what might happen. It is quite likely that half of our nation will be grieving, and if we have empathy, we will all share in our neighbors' grief.

I can understand those who worry that they are losing what they've always known and loved about America. I have to confess that the vision frequently raised throughout the Bible, that of a new heaven and a new earth, was always a little troubling to me, because I don't want everything old to pass away. If we are to live into this vision, there will be grief for those of us who have anything of the past that we love. Now I have experienced moments when God proved me totally wrong when I feared an uncertain future—but it's human nature for us to fight unwelcome change. So we hold on to the past.

In a way (and, thank God, without the threat of violence), the PC(USA) went through a time of painful division in recent years. Those who believed in traditional marriage and their reading of Scripture tried to keep the denomination from straying away from God's will. Those who believed that we were to live into God's new creation by welcoming people who are on the margins of society tried to open the denomination to a new, and therefore unknown, future. Observers would say that in the PC(USA), the latter group has become the majority, at least at the General Assembly level. The question is, how will the new majority take on their increased power?

In this summer's GA, there was an overture that caused our more conservative leaders to speak from their new position as a minority. I wrote about this overture, and my fear that it threatened to continue the cycle of division by potentially "otherizing" our conservative candidates for ministry. As the GA discerned together, I marveled at how God proved me wrong, when the body amended the overture out of respect for the concerns of the conservatives.

I was heartened by a statement immediately following GA, from the Board of The Fellowship Community, a covenant community of leaders and congregations who strive to stay faithful within the PC(USA) while acknowledging that their theology might cause them to critique the PC(USA). In short, they are a traditional/conservative voice from within the denomination. In their statement, The Fellowship Community wrote that while they had hoped the overture would be disapproved entirely, the "team came away encouraged that the GA responded to some of our concerns with more balanced language and assured that traditional interpretations are within constitutional bounds."

That was their July newsletter. In their September newsletter, a poem was offered, I think for the sake of those who are struggling with the changes that put them in the minority. The poem is from Laura Truman, included in the book *A Rhythm of Prayer*:

God, grant us the humility of a decentered but Beloved self.
As we continue to take the single step that is in front of us, Jesus, keep us from becoming what we are called to transform.
Protect us from using the empire's violence—in our words, in our theology, in our activism, and in our politics—for your Kingdom of peace.
Keep our anger from becoming meanness.
Keep our sorrow from collapsing into self-pity.
Keep our hearts soft enough to keep breaking.
Keep our outrage turned towards justice, not cruelty.
Remind us that all of this, every bit of it, is for love. Keep us fiercely kind. Amen.

As the apostle Paul ends his letter to the Galatians, he warns against participating in worldly conflicts like those trying to impose circumcision on everyone new to the faith. Here, what passes away in the new creation is not what one side or the other cherishes. What passes away is the division itself. May that be so.

Whatever happens in the coming days, may we live into God's new creation, where there is no reason to divide, where everyone knows they are beloved. May we always remember:

- For those who are decentered, know that you are still beloved, and act out of that love.
- For those who rise in power, may you show justice and humility and grace.
- For every one of us who claims Christ as our Lord, let us live out the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In doing so, we break the cycle of division and violence. We give the world a glimpse of the kingdom. We live into a dream that we all can love. We become God's new creation.

Peace,

Wendy