

Pursuing A House United: Our House is On Fire

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brilliant, faithful, young German pastor enjoying his service to two German-speaking churches across the English Channel in London. Twelve years later he would die a martyr for his resistance to the Nazis. Karl Barth was an influential theologian at work in Bonn to oppose the Third Reich. He was a mentor and a friend to young Dietrich. And in 1933 he wrote that it was time for him to come home from London: 'You are a German,...the house of your church is on fire,...you must return to your post by the next ship.' (Hilton, Allen, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*, vii).

Pastor Allen Hilton (who wrote the book *House United* that I've invited you to read this summer) thinks that if Barth were alive today, he'd write the Christian churches of the US an urgent message: 'You are an American,...your nation's house is on fire, ...turn around and put it out!'

What fire? Well half of America would say the menacing conflagration comes from the damned liberals. And half would say from the damned conservatives. How much hysteria have you heard, read and experienced about the first presidential debate? Democrats fretting. Republicans dancing. Apocalyptic visions of what's at stake in a Trump or Biden presidency. The sense of existential threat to 'our' vision of America. Anguish along the fault lines of immigration, healthcare, gender identity, the size and role of government, abortion, gun politics, anti-racism, free speech, democratic principles, fitness of age and temperament.

It's no secret that our country is being pulled apart by polarizing hostilities, by 24-hour information, and by a lonely loss of identity deeper than partisan bigotry. And there's no doubt that we're only going to watch the us-versus-them animosity increase as we near November's presidential election.

In his 1858 pre-Civil-War speech – at a time of 17 free states and 15 slave states – Lincoln famously quoted Jesus: 'a house divided against itself cannot stand.' And Lincoln's prophecy was just three years out from civil war. Can you imagine where we might be even now if all the blue states were in the east and all the red states were in the west? Can you just hear the modern-day appropriations of the Declaration of Independence? 'When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another...'

Friends, what are the signs you see that our house is on fire? Let's just list a few:

- Apocalyptic nature of rage & tolerance of meanness/partisan bigotry
- People relocating geographically to be in political environments more akin to their own vision
- Moments of crisis like the pandemic being politicized into binary foodfight
- People no longer going home for Thanksgiving/Christmas to avoid politics at table
- Growth in political leaning as sense of (thin, unsatisfying) personal identity
- Consumption of news sources that fan our anger/anxiety to cement our attachments
- Government gridlock
- National agendas being fought at the level of the local city council or schoolboard

- People being shouted down before they speak on college campuses

-So our house is on fire. What are Christ-followers to do?

- Are we going to pour gasoline on it? A lot of church leaders and churches have, believing that 'righteous political convictions license us to nurse open disdain for half the nation' (Hilton, ix).
- Are we going to stand by helplessly wringing our hands over a situation so complex?
- Or because we are followers of Christ, do we have to come home from England and take some responsibility?

-In Christian circles I've often heard Jeremiah 29:11 quoted for good reason, to recall that we are not alone, that God is at work. It is encouraging: 'For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.' God is at work to redeem, to work his kingdom good.

But what often gets omitted is the context. The people of Jerusalem had been conquered in warfare and taken as slaves from Jerusalem to Babylon (present day Iraq). So these verses were part of a larger letter Jeremiah sent to God's people in Babylon. And what he wrote was really hard to swallow if you are living in exile hoping to hear word of a quick exit. And let's call 'exile' for present purposes that place that feels oppressively unlike home (perhaps because the people imprisoning you there are trying to destroy it with their smug, oppressive vision of the way things should be). Think of him writing God's word to the blue states or the red states who are feeling not at home in the Divided States of America:

29These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem . . . : ⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles . . . : ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

[And then this conclusion...]

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

What?! What was the Lord's word for His people feeling so lost and displaced and dispirited? These were the people who asked: 'How can I sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' Who wrote: 'By the waters of Babylon, we lay down and wept for Zion, for home, for Jerusalem, for the life of normalcy we hoped for.'

What was God's word to them? 'Invest in the place where you are. In this place of exile. Build. Plant. Marry. Bear children.'

The Lord calls for them to seek the welfare of the city to which they have been exiled, to seek the good of these people – their enemies, to pray for this place of pagan authority, to invest in it, to seek its good. Why? Because in seeking its shalom (welfare, wholeness, flourishing and delight), they will discover their own.

Doesn't that transform the way you hear Jeremiah 29.11? Doesn't it fill it with earthy, grounded, unsentimental, powerful meaning? 'For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to give you a future with hope (as you *invest* in the country of your sojourn, as you pray for it, as you invest in your neighbor, as you recall your identity *not* to be at war but to belong to the Lord).

-Friends, we know our own country, our own city, our own house is on fire. The question is this: Who is going to *do* something about the widening rift between 'us' and 'them'? The one that is exiling us from one another. Pastor Allen Hilton nominates those who follow Christ, who, regardless of their perspectives, have a far higher calling to seek the welfare of the city to which they have been exiled.

-Question: How does Jesus say people will know that his followers truly belong to *him*? [by their love, by their unity]

In John 13, he washes his disciples' feet and commands us to love one another as he has loved us. Why? *So that...* others will know we belong to him.

In John 17, Jesus prays to God the Father with these words: '**I ask ... that [those who believe in me] may all be one.** As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,^[1] so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' (John 17.20-23)

-'One.' Jesus prays that his followers may be 'one' even as the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. The Greek word for this is *Koinonia*. Communion. Fellowship. Inter-penetrating lives. We are to enjoy a communion of loving unity that is like the Son's unity with the Father and the Father's unity with the Son.

-'Glory.' Jesus says that the 'glory' he has received from God he has passed on to believers to make us one. A good definition for the word 'glory' is '*essence*.' You get to the *glory* of an onion when it makes you cry. Jesus has given us God's glory, God's very essence, the Spirit of Christ, the new self that seeks not sameness but peaceable relationship. Jesus also uses the word 'glory' in John to point to the cross. We get to the glory of Christ on the day of his crucifixion. Which means that in essence, he has given us the love of God that makes grave *sacrifices* for the other, even for the enemy, for the person who is not merely annoying but full of murderous vitriol. Christ has given us *himself*, dwelling in us, *himself* that sees all as God's children, *himself* that gives himself up, so that we might be unified in a grace we ourselves cannot generate.

Why? What is the purpose of unity, of being one? Jesus prays that we might be *one*, *so that* the world may know that God has sent him and has loved them even as God has loved him. It will be our countercultural unity that reveals to a polarized country who *Jesus* is. That he has come from God. And that this God is love.

Jesus is saying that those who believe have been **called to a unity that reflects who God is.** It's THAT BIG.

-How would it impact the Divided States of America if followers of Christ put out the fires and pursued A House United? What if people all over our country could look at Christians and say: 'see how they love one another and stay connected.' Well, it would be a good start, wouldn't it?

But what does unity in Christ look like? Does it require unity in our beliefs about God? And which ones? Are there some that are more important than others?

Does it require unity of perspective on what our beliefs lead us to espouse *politically*?

Does it mean a commitment to sharing physical space even when our beliefs and perspectives may differ? And if so, how do we honor our sense of what's true without some sort of unsatisfying, mushy compromise?

What is this unity that Jesus prays for his church?

-We Presbyterians are a 'confessional' church. Which means by tradition we are guided by the witness of confessions (written formulations) of faith made by our sisters and brothers at various moments in history. Confessions seek to mark out the good news of Christ in times when it is under threat. (Like, the Barmen Declaration, signed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that would affirm the Lordship of Christ alone, not the Nazi Reich, over the Church).

The Confession of Belhar was adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa. It was written as a protest against the harsh injustices of government-imposed Apartheid, which separated the races and imposed domination by those who were white.

The Confession of Belhar is a joyful statement of faith in Jesus. It lifts up the heart of the gospel as our enduring hope that because 'we have been reconciled with God and with one another... unity is...both a gift *and* an *obligation* of the church of Jesus Christ...' (Confession of Belhar).

How can those reconciled to Christ consent to remain separate? It is an offense to the gospel which overcomes the human sin of hateful separation. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. And that makes unity with our sisters and brothers a *gift*. That makes unity with our sisters and brothers an *obligation*, a proclamation of the new reality.

- I myself sense that a Christ-centered church in a blue city in a red state (like FPC) is *uniquely* gifted to answer the call to put out the fire of polarizing rage, to seek the welfare of our city, to pursue a house united.

And not only by getting good at *not* talking about what divides us. I believe there are many who are hungry to find a church where they can risk both bringing their whole selves and engaging others who see the world differently.

-I love the motto of the Moravian Church and wonder if its motto may point us forward:

‘In things essential, unity; in things non-essential, liberty; in all things charity.’ (Repeat)

Such important words. Meaning: there is the need to be together on what is essential to our hope in Christ; there is freedom for many perspectives on things that are not essential; and regardless of whether we are talking of things essential or things non-essential, there is to be charity (or love).

That motto could immediately send us scrambling to the next problem: ‘All well and good, but what’s essential and what’s not? Isn’t that the whole conflict?’ But what if the conversation over what’s essential and what’s not first of all exhibits the humility to say that not everything is essential. And what if the whole conversation – what if all things – are covered by charity? What if Christ and his love, real engagement over what’s essential, not full agreement, becomes key? Conscientious Christians conflict. People disagree in good faith. And even where there is no full agreement over what is *essential*, Christ is honored by truth-seeking charity.

So say my neighbor is going to vote for Trump or Biden, and I just can’t. Still living for the charity of Christ sets me free from making what happens in politics the center of my world and identity.

I missed the debate last week over which I’ve heard so much kvetching. I missed it because our church was at work so that three families in Mexico could have homes. And the world was better for our focus. We have seen Facebook celebrations by the families for which we built, where their whole communities are commenting, exulting, writing in Spanish: ‘Can you believe these persons came from way north Montana because of Christ to build us homes?’ Something eternal was happening. And somewhere in some studio somewhere in America were two men fumbling and posturing over a power that will pass away like mist.

This doesn’t mean that presidential debates are unimportant to me. I’m an American Studies major. I’ve worked as a secretary for a US congressman. I think this stuff matters. And I’m appalled by the food fight they have become. But the food fight is not the main thing in my life or in yours. Political rage is not the main thing. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They matter. But more important – I’d go so far as to say, what’s essential – are faith, hope and love.../