

November 6, 2016
All Saints' Sunday, Year C, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18
Psalm 130
Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

In preparing for Day School chapel, Chaplain Eric sometimes selects a topic of the week for the daily homilies. Two weeks ago, the topic was the Hindu festival of Diwali and, by extension, its more universal themes: the victory of light over darkness, and especially, of good over evil. On Thursday of that week, my elementary school homiletical task was to discuss good and evil in *personal* terms. I brought in two props: an angel halo from the Christmas Pageant, and devil horns that belong to our dog. Angel or devil: Which are you?

There are many human traits that our culture categorizes with opposing binaries: angel/devil; male/female; white/black; even American/non-American. These binaries offer simple answers to complicated questions. But they don't always work. It's like the two baskets that Jakki and I use to sort our laundry into lights and darks. Those two baskets make sorting simple ... until it's not. Nearly every week, the question arises between us: "Do you usually wash this with lights or with darks?" We *fear* what might happen if something ends up in the *wrong* basket.

Cultural binaries appear simple on the surface, but problems lie just below. Like laundry, people are much more complicated than opposing boxes can describe. For one thing, most human characteristics lie on a spectrum that people can occupy at any point. For example, regarding nationality, race, and sex: there are many ways to be an American; human skin comes in infinite shades; and the varieties of gender identity are just now becoming understood and expressed. A second problem arises when one box is judged good and the other is judged bad. In our culture, at the extreme, the "good" box contains male and white and American, while the "bad" box contains female and black and non-American. This leads to another complication: the rules for the occupants of each box are rigid. Even those in a "good" box might find the space suffocating.

In today's reading from Luke, Jesus seems to be embracing the binary thinking that I am pushing against. His Sermon on the Plain begins with the social reversal that threads through Luke's Gospel. Jesus is sorting his laundry with a series of blessings and woes that are clearly oppositional human conditions: rich/poor; full/hungry; laughing/weeping; esteem/animosity. But notice his subsequent shift from status to behavior. His instructions conclude with what we know as the Golden Rule: Do **to** others as you would have them do to you.

The blessings and woes describe common human *conditions*; following them are directions for radical human *action*. Those directions apply to everyone, no matter their condition. Perhaps Jesus is taking us beyond the binaries, to a place that is less about where a person begins, and more about what a person does. Rather than two opposing boxes, Jesus ends up with one big box and one big rule. Wherever one is on the angel/devil spectrum, the rule is the same. By whatever scale, at whatever measure, the rule is the same. And that rule is as simple as it gets: Do to others as you would have them do to you.

We are at the tail end of a dreadful election season. On Tuesday, most of us will be going to the polls to cast our votes for the next President. I hadn't planned to directly address the election from this pulpit. But last week a parishioner emailed me an article by Jim Wallis. Wallis is a rarity: he's a *progressive* evangelical Christian.¹ Writing about the responsibilities of Christian pastors this election season, the heart of his message is this, and I quote: "The truth about racial and gender bigotry in this election campaign must be spoken. The danger felt by our black brothers and sisters in Christ is a truth that must be lifted up and shared—because these are 'gospel issues.'"

I think you all understand these issues in the context of this election *and* in the context of progressive Christianity. But maybe Wallis is right that it bears talking about. Polls show that more than half of Americans, Democrat and Republican, are experiencing anxiety about the election.² If you are among that anxious majority, you are not alone. I've been anxious, with anxiety that has a lot to do with racial and gender bigotry.

In the midst of such anxiety, it can help to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. We hear that large swaths of Americans—mostly white and mostly male—feel dispossessed. It's true that the rapidly shifting economic terrain has been destructive for some, who now seem to be trying to recover a past that was kinder to them. The broader truth is that there is no ideal past to return to. Knock the lenses out of those rose-colored glasses, and the sepia tones of nostalgia become noticeably more shadowed. The post-World War II 1950s are often held up as a glorious time, but they weren't glorious for everyone. Eventually the 1950s yielded, literally and figuratively, to the 1960s.

The 1960s were tumultuous, and thank God for that. The 1960s brought significant improvements in all three of the areas that have figured so prominently in this Presidential election season: sexism, racism, and immigration. You might recognize here echoes of the start of this sermon: male/female; black/white; American/non-American. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, those oppositional boxes began to be blown apart. Here are some examples.

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In pushing it through Congress, Democratic president Lyndon Johnson initiated political shifts that lost the South to the Republican Party to this day. He couldn't—or wouldn't—have done it without the leadership of the black civil rights activists of his day. On the mementos table, along with photos of the people I'm about to mention, you can find a photo of President Johnson signing the Act, with Dr. King standing behind him.

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson led Congress in passing new immigration legislation that removed the quotas and preferences favoring immigrants from Central, Western, and Northern Europe. This was expected to increase immigration from Italy, Greece, and Portugal. It did that, and later also increased immigration from Asia and Africa.

Also in 1965, a Supreme Court decision gave access to oral contraceptives to married women across the country. By then, Margaret Sanger had for more than 40 years led the fight for women's access to birth control.

In 1967, another Supreme Court decision made interracial marriage legal across the country. At the time of that decision, 17 states had anti-miscegenation laws. The story of the plaintiffs in that case are the subject of the new film, *Loving*.

Let's return to angels and devils. Lyndon Johnson was a flawed political figure if ever there was one. Flawed or not, he was a key figure in much of the most important social justice legislation passed in my lifetime. He even risked the future of his own political party in order to do the right thing. Rather than being fully angel or fully devil, Johnson fell somewhere in between.

It may be that, on the angel/devil spectrum, everyone falls somewhere in between. It's good for us to ponder that, lest we get stuck thinking that the angel standards are too high. That Thursday in Day School chapel, with angel halo and devil horns, I talked to the students about making good decisions. I said that we all have moments when we can choose to do the more angelic thing, or the more devilish one. Sometimes we will go one way, and sometimes the other. Importantly, we can help one another to choose well.

Today we're celebrating All Saints' Day with some All Souls' Day thrown in. It's said that All Souls' Day was created regular people felt uncomfortable conferring the title of "Saint" upon regular people, either themselves or others. I think that only a dash of "angel" is required to wear the halo.

Therefore, on this politically-charged All Saints' Sunday, I am especially remembering dearly departed people like Saints Lyndon Johnson and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Saint Margaret Sanger, and Saints Richard and Mildred Jeter Loving. I could add so many more. Instead, I'll just mention my father, Saint Joe. He, along with my mother, was instrumental in forming my own awareness of racial injustice in the sharply segregated Louisiana of my childhood. Doing unto others is personal, and it's so very much more. For every one of us, the personal *is* political. Sometimes Christianity is political. Christianity, personal, and political, the work is not finished. In some respects, the more we learn, the more there is to do.

We offer today's requiem in memory of those dear saints who have preceded us in death. We mourn their physical absence, even as we give thanks for the ways they remain present with us. Though dead in body, they are alive in spirit—alive in the life of the resurrected Christ, and alive through the ways their legacies continue to touch others. Imagine all the devilish, angelic saints that we are together remembering today. It's an amazing crowd. They have passed their torches—or perhaps their halos—on to us.

We will all be very glad when this election is over. Remember, no matter how it turns out, God is working on the long plan. On All Saints', we look to the past, seeking inspiration for the now, in service to the future. With God's grace, Saints past, present, and future journey together along an arc of salvation that always bends towards justice. Today, give thanks for those who have departed, and for those yet to come. Today, claim your place and your work among that great cloud of witnesses.

Notes

¹ Jim Wallis, “One More Sunday: What Should Pastors Say Before Election Day,” Sojourners online. November 3, 2016, available at <https://sojo.net/articles/one-more-sunday-what-should-pastors-say-election-day> (accessed November 5, 2016).

² American Psychological Association, “APA Survey Reveals 2016 Presidential Election Source of Significant Stress for More Than Half of Americans,” October 13, 2016, available online at <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2016/10/presidential-election-stress.aspx> (accessed November 5, 2016).