

Protest, Progress, and Prerequisites

1st Corinthians 1:18-31; Micah 6:1-8

CWZepp, BWCOB, February 2, 2020

“We are living through a golden age of protest.”

So declared the title of an article that ran in *The Guardian* in the spring of 2018.¹ The basic premise was simple – during the first 15 months of the 45th presidency, more people joined public demonstrations of one form or another than at any other time in American history. Even adjusting for population growth, the 10-15 million people who showed up for marches, rallies, vigils, and other protests since the 2017 presidential inauguration is estimated to represent a higher percentage of our population than that which took to the streets during the height of the Vietnam anti-war movement in 1969 and 1970, the previous high-water mark for dissent in America. Those numbers came from everything from the Women’s Marches in 650 communities the day after the inauguration to the *March for our Lives* gun control rallies in 750+ communities in April 2018.

But alongside these massive protest numbers, the article went on to also suggest that to that point, there had been relatively little non-violent direct action and other stronger forms of protest amid all those rallies, with only 3 protests during that time being able to be characterized as mass direct actions, far less than comparable actions of the past. The author, LA Kauffman, writes, “*The resistance has been massive, persistent and ubiquitous, but with few exceptions, it’s been curiously reluctant to use the stronger tools in the toolbox of nonviolent action. We’ve used our voices to decry this national charade, but mostly we haven’t been using our bodies to disrupt it or shut it down.*” She concludes, “*The question now...is whether the huge numbers of people who have protested this administration will, if necessary, take stronger steps to safeguard democratic institutions and the rights of vulnerable communities, as the most significant social movements in our country’s history, from the civil rights movement to the Aids activist group Act Up, have done in the past.*”

I have been thinking about this article a lot lately. Like many of you, I have been monitoring the steady stream of news coming out of our nation’s capital as the impeachment proceedings against our president have progressed. And while it is not my desire to delve into the realm of politics, I know that I am not alone in saying that I am deeply concerned about the state of our nation, for a whole host of reasons that I will not go into in these moments. I am likewise deeply concerned about the state of the church – both the church universal and the Church of the Brethren specifically – and for much of the same reasons. Everywhere I look, it seems that we are divided. Differences of opinion have devolved into defensiveness, judgmentalism, and generalized nastiness that masquerades as principled conviction. And instead of working together for the common and greater good, those that should be leading us are stuck in cycles of finger-pointing and bids to retain or reclaim power. It is more than enough to make one feel hopeless and helpless and rather pessimistic about our future.

So what is one to do? As I was contemplating this question, I was reminded of something that Jim Wallis – the writer, public theologian, and founder of *Sojourners* – said during his sermon at National Youth Conference in 2006. I don’t remember the context, though I am sure it had

¹ LA Kauffman. May 6, 2018. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/06/protest-trump-direct-action-activism>

something to do with his then current work on *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. But I have always remembered that he told the youth gathered there in Fort Collins that year that "protest is fine, but alternatives are better." It was a reminder that unless we are working *towards* something, a protest is little more than discontent writ large.

Protest is fine, but alternatives are better. Remembering this line helped me to think about the two primary points raised in that article in *The Guardian*: the huge numbers of protests, coupled with comparatively low numbers of game-changing, results-oriented direct action. What I see – widespread discontent, but without a clear and specific vision for what a different and better future could look like. The same could be said for both our country and our church.

As I was pondering these thoughts and preparing for this sermon, a commentary I was reading pointed me to another protest-themed resource from 2018: an article in *The Atlantic* entitled "The Big Question: What was the most influential act of protest in history?" In answering the question, a number of history-altering protests were named, including²:

- Martin Luther's 95 theses, reportedly hammered to the door of Wittenberg Castle Church over 500 years ago, which instigated the Reformation.
- The protests against the Stamp Act in 1765, which inevitably led to the creation of the United States a decade later.
- The Silent Sentinels' protest outside the White House in 1919, which helped finally grant half of America's citizens the right to vote.
- Mahatma Gandhi's 241-mile Salt March in 1930, which peacefully defied British colonial tax policy in India and inspired millions worldwide.
- The 80,000 thousand Muslim women and men who formed an "army of peace" under the leadership of Abdul Ghaffar Khan and endured severe maltreatment to protest England's oppressive occupation of what is now Pakistan in the 1930s.
- Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955, which ignited the civil rights movement.
- The conscientious objector Randy Kehler, who went to jail for nearly two years to protest against the Vietnam War, and whose sacrifice persuaded Daniel Ellsberg to later share the Pentagon Papers.
- And even the Beatles, who refused to play for segregated audiences in Jacksonville, Florida in September 1964.

All of this was bouncing around my head for much of the past week, while I was in California for a retreat of the Steering Committee for the Supportive Communities Network. We were meeting to organize ourselves and make plans for our continuing work to build a more just and inclusive church. The movement was founded as a protest and a response to a church that had proven itself exceptionally hostile to LGBTQ persons. But rainbow scarves and pockets of welcoming communities were never meant to be an end in themselves. And so much of our time at this retreat was spent thinking about how we might make genuine progress towards transforming our church into one that is welcoming and affirming of all persons, especially in the midst of deep division and hostility.

² March 2018 Issue. Available Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/03/q-what-was-the-most-influential-act-of-protest-in-history/550946/>

We were deeply aware that protest would not be enough to achieve any degree of progress toward that vision. All of us who gathered around that circle have been involved in costly action and made sacrifices in order to advance what we believe to be the call of Christ and the kingdom values of justice that we see at the heart of the gospel for all of God's children. We have a vision for what the church can and should be – an alternative to the current status quo of division and discontent. And we feel called to engage the powers in order to make progress toward that vision.

And though our goals are grounded in extending Christ's welcome to the LGBTQ community in particular, we are well aware that being an inclusive church is not a narrow value that draws lines around a specific group or community of people. It extends to everyone – to all those who have been excluded or marginalized in the church. I shared with the group how shortly after I was defrocked by our district, one of the first people I heard from was a mother in Illinois, who wrote to tell me that as a white mother of two black girls, she is constantly running up against the subtle racism of the church that makes her family feel like outsiders. But she told me, because of what I did – even without having, in her words, “skin in the game” – she knew I was a safe person for her girls, and had hope that the church might one day follow suit.

I keep that note close by me still, and I revisit it whenever I lose heart that the struggle for justice and inclusion is worth the cost. It is a reminder that this work is at the heart of the gospel – a gospel which might seem foolish, were it not for the witness of the Christ who lived it. It is a reminder that loving God and loving our neighbors is not a belief, but a way of life. And it is a reminder that this work is one God's prerequisites for life. For as our scripture from Micah declares: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Those words remain above the doors of our sanctuary, a remnant from VBS several years ago, and a reminder that what we do inside these doors is but a prelude to the work of Jesus that we are called to continue beyond them. And it is worth noting that they did not come from nowhere, but rather were God's protest of the religious life of 8th century BCE Jerusalem. The setting of this text is actually a courtroom, with God bringing a “controversy” with the people and “contending” with them. A little digging reveals that what God is protesting is essentially that Israel is “talking the talk” of worship, without “walking the walk” outside of worship. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann boils it down to offerings being made and cultic practices continuing to be followed, all the while “aggressive land practices” and “exploitative policies that generate wealth at the expense of the vulnerable” continue.³ Thus the “talk” that God (through Micah) critiques is the exclusive attention paid to the pious practices of the faith, without the ethical obedience that faith requires. In other words, the people of Israel were not meeting the basic prerequisites of the faith – doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

As commentator Andrew Foster Connors writes about today's scripture text from Micah: “This text is a challenge to do justice as part of our worship experience, and to do worship with our acts of justice as part of our liturgy. We forget the “controversy” that the Lord has with the people prior to the chosen snippet of text and conveniently ignore the judgment that immediately follows it.” He continues:

This temptation has never been greater for the North American church than it is today. Deep divisions in church and in the American landscape shape... leaders who are reluctant

³ *An Introduction the Old Testament*. (2003). p. 234.

to get specific about Christian ethical imperatives. So divided are many of our congregations that and the communities where they reside that even well-intentioned appeals to dialogue on ethical issues are sometimes viewed negatively as violations of Christian unity...Before we handle this text, we must prepare ourselves to be handled by its prophetic vision, a vision that sees the ethical world not as a threat to unity but as the place where faith finds its legs.⁴

I find that phrase – “where faith finds its legs” – an extremely compelling one. And it calls me to think of Jesus – the one in whom we confess faith literally found its legs. I had never really thought of Jesus as a protester until I read an old article this week from *Sojourners* magazine by Stephen Mattson entitled, “Jesus was a protester.”⁵ I want to share some of it at length:

If Christians are honest with themselves about the gospel message of Jesus, they should know that protesting can be a holy act of righteousness. Protesting is the antithesis of being apathetic, complicit, callous, and passive, and Christians should take comfort in the fact that Jesus — the son of God — was very good at it....

When Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), he rejected the temptation of worldly power and boldly stood against Satan’s temptations — because Jesus was a protester.

When Jesus stormed into the temple courts, interrupted the proceeding by overturning tables, yelling and driving both people and animals out of the room using a whip, he was condemning the greed and corruption of religious hypocrites — because Jesus was a protester (John 2:13-25).

Jesus boldly stood up and spoke in the synagogue — one of many he would speak in — proclaiming things so countercultural and radical that he created a mob so furious at him they eventually chased him with the intention of killing him — because Jesus was a protester (Luke 4:16-31).

Jesus confronted the leaders about their wrong practices, evil thoughts and destructive deeds — because Jesus was a protester (Mark 2:1-12; Luke 11).

Jesus broke the religious expectations and laws of the day, to the point of people wanting him to die — because Jesus was a protester (John 5:16; Mark 3:1-6).

Jesus openly rebuked, held accountable, challenged and called out people who refused to change from their misguided ways — because Jesus was a protester (Matthew 11:20-30).

Jesus empathized and advocated for the oppressed, hurt, abused, downtrodden, abandoned, alienated and victimized — because Jesus was a protester (Luke 7).

Jesus was accused by the “experts” of being disruptive and evil — because Jesus was a protester (Matt. 9:2-8).

Jesus stands alone before a mob that’s ready to kill a woman and intervenes on her behalf, saving her life — because Jesus is a protester (John 8:1-11).

Jesus devoted his life to speaking, helping, supporting, defending, empowering, healing, freeing, and loving everyone, especially saving those who were in desperate need from the

⁴ *Feasting on the Word*. Year A. Volume 1. p. 294.

⁵ March 16, 2016. Available Online: <https://sojo.net/articles/jesus-was-protester>

hands of oppressors, rulers, officials, mobs, and those who intended to harm, kill, and destroy — because Jesus was a protester.

Throughout his life Jesus protested and brought awareness about gender inequality, religious hypocrisy, political corruption, racism, hate, segregation, empowerment, and social injustice. Christ humbly sacrificed and served to advocate for the outcasts, protect the poor, shelter the homeless, uplift the exploited, show hospitality to stranger, energize the weary, and love humanity.

Jesus was mocked, ridiculed, abused, intimidated and arrested because he dared to become a protester. Eventually, he was arrested and put on trial, and then he was publicly humiliated, mocked and severely tortured.

It was in this context where his greatest demonstration of protest happened: dying on the cross, where God incarnate proved to the world that love trumps evil, grace trumps revenge, mercy trumps cruelty, generosity trumps selfishness, hope trumps fear, and God trumps Satan.

So today, when politicians — and the masses that follow them — promote racism, hate, bigotry, deception and oppressive policies that are inhumane, immoral, violent and blatantly anti-Christian, we must ask ourselves: What would Jesus do?

Will followers of Christ follow in his footsteps and be bold enough to speak against, act against, and protest against sin? Contrary to our religious assumptions about righteousness and holiness, sometimes the most Christ-like thing we can do is protest.

If we are to make any progress towards Jesus' vision of ushering in the Kingdom of God "on earth as in heaven," perhaps we will have to be more intentional in meeting the God's prerequisites. And that might just mean we will end up with some protest work of our own. So I will finish with Mattson's conclusion:

Defending the gospel for the sake of humanity — people loved and created in the image of God — was the reason Jesus protested. Are we willing to do the same? God help us.

Benediction

From Pastor Renée Notkin, as related in a New York Times opinion column this past Christmas Eve...

"I am daily inspired by how Jesus continually turns the world upside down in regards to power, might, world success and achievement. Jesus' subversive challenges to the human-crafted structures that oppress and bind is what keeps me following Jesus and holding on to hope that there is a third way — the Jesus way that brings healing to individuals, communities and nations."⁶

May we go, and may we always strive for this Jesus way...

⁶ Quoted in "Christmas Turns the World Upside Down What does it mean for God's power to be "made perfect in weakness"?" by Peter Wehner. The New York Times. December 24, 2019. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/24/opinion/christ-meaning-of-christmas.html>