



*“You are the light of the world -- like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden...
Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise the heavenly Father.”
- Matt. 5:14, 16*

Dear friends of the United Methodist Church in Madison,

As I have been coming off a much needed renewal leave, I admit that I have been struggling with how to address our congregation regarding the events that unfolded at the US Capitol Building last week. I've struggled in part because the actions which took place are certainly unprecedented. But I confess that I have also struggled because I do not know what I could say that hasn't already been said by the outpouring of responses from so many people of faith throughout these last few days. However, upon having my own “come to Jesus moment” this week, I realized that my need to respond is not actually about bringing something new to the table or even convincing anyone of anything. Rather, it is to add my voice to those who stand in witness of what *must continue* to be said until one day, with God's almighty help and our courageous action, hopefully something sticks.

As a Christian leader, watching rioters cloak their violent action, intolerance, hatred, and racism in *Christian* rhetoric, poisonous ideology, ‘Jesus Saves’ flags, and the name of President Trump - I am put in a difficult position of responsibility that would be easier to not have. It is difficult because as a divided people in a politically polarized country, we struggle to hear one another for what we are saying when we attempt to talk about hard things, even on our *best* days. And historically, many of us - myself included - were formed with the idea that the people we *least* want to hear from about anything that sounds even remotely political are pastors in pulpits. Trust me, many pastors are palpably aware of this and come to the pulpit - especially in these days - in an attitude of fear and trembling, tired of being in a position to have to choose between saying something that we know risks making the people we love angry, or not saying anything at all and being unable to live with our own conscience. So I want to preface this by saying that I believe *many* of our political differences have the potential to enrich our lives. I believe that people of good faith can be found in every political party. I have never wanted to be a pastor to a congregation that all thinks in one way about everything. And I do not believe that the events of last week can be laid solely to blame at any one person's or party's feet. There is plenty of blame to go around.

However, there are times when, as people of faith who all follow in the footsteps of Jesus the Christ -- a man we profess to have been the closest living thing to God on earth, and who condemned those that distorted religion to gain power and violent advantage over others -- we cannot afford to mince words about what's right and what's wrong.

The actions of the rioters who stormed the People's House, waving anti-semitic and racist banners, raising gallows on the National Mall, carrying weapons, and threatening to disrupt a peaceful transfer of power through use of violent force in the name of Jesus and the President are wrong. These actions are not the marks of peaceful protest. They are not in keeping with the spirit of our constitutional right to freedom of speech. They are gross distortions of the very best

that religion can offer and they do not reflect what Jesus sought to embody or the task he gave each of us to be a light to the world.

Further, the words and actions of those in leadership -- even in our highest forms of political office -- that condone, incite, overly sympathize with, or fail to call out such violence are wrong. And I believe our faith requires us to have the courage to name it as such, no matter what name was on our ballots or what side we typically agree with. Words are powerful. They give rise to action. The Bible often speaks about the responsibility we bear for how our words are heard and acted upon -- and this is certainly all the more true for leaders with inordinate influence -- whether in nations, organizations, or congregations. What we say *and* what we choose *not* to say matters.

Finally, while most of us have been taught that a separation of “Church” and “state” means we should refrain from discussing anything political within the four walls of a sanctuary, the truth is that throughout history, the Church has also recognized its need to repent of its silence and failure to mobilize itself against injustice done in the world, often contributing to it instead. In Jesus’ day and in the ancient world that formed him, there was very little separation between religion and politics. Everything one believed about God informed everything one did. For better and for worse, it informed how they carried out politics, economics, and their social relationships. Jesus was killed by state officials because he called out the ways in which they used religious authority and their understanding of their relationship to God as a means to gain power and exercise violent control over their fellow neighbors. And the theology of the early Church that we have inherited was primarily formed by those with inordinate political influence.

I would argue that despite our desire to keep politics separate from the Church, the reality is they are not and never have been separate. They are not separate because of our history which has formed our Christian tradition. They are not separate because what we choose to believe in *always* impacts our actions. They are not separate because we were created in connection and every choice we make on how to live impacts others, whether we like it or not. They are not separate because there have always been political leaders and those who insist on exercising their political rights who distort religion as a means to sanction actions in the name of God that often run in direct contradiction to everything a life of faith is supposed to be about. If the Church of all places has no right to say anything about it, if the Church of all places is not made up of people who have the courage to talk to each other, and to critique and confess when our own actions, our teachings, or our histories make us complicit in not always doing right by our neighbors, what hope is there? After all, confession, prophetic witness, and the struggle to live a life faithful to God and our neighbor is supposed to be our bread and butter.

I will be the first to confess that as a person who comes from a place of tremendous privilege and often takes that position for granted, I am sometimes a part of the problem. I have not always spoken out when I could have. I have not always recognized or taken responsibility for the implicit cultural and racial biases deeply ingrained in my own formation and worldview. And so, I don’t speak as someone who has reached some greater, more righteous plane of existence from anyone else. I simply believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ reminds us that we are called to be a light unto the world, which means that we are all called to do better. To do better at naming what is wrong within us and around us -- like that violence, white supremacy, and hatred are deeply woven into the history and development of our nation and must be called to account. And to do better at accepting partial responsibility for the problems that plague us, working together for a more just society in the places we have been tasked to inhabit every day.

Friends, these are not normal times. As fellow citizens and people of good faith, I would invite you to join me in deep prayer for our political leaders, including President Trump, and all those who will hold office in the coming days. Pray for your fellow neighbors, that somehow we might be able to find ways to work together through that which unifies us, instead of allowing our differences to make enemies of each other. Pray for yourself. Pray for me. That each of us might heed the call on our own lives to open our ears to each other and to turn our hearts toward repentance and more just action. Let us choose this day to pray and work together toward love and justice in the world. If not us, then who?

Grace & peace to you, my friends,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kate Hillis", written over a horizontal line.

Rev. Kate Hillis
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