



“Enlightened Heart Eyes”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

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Ephesians 1:11-23 (NRSV)***

Theologian and political commentator Jim Wallis recently began a six-part series on his blog, “Hearts and Minds,” reflecting on the first two years of President Obama’s administration. In his first installment of the series, which he posted this past Thursday, November 4, Wallis wrote:

In politics there is always a spiritual choice to be made—to choose hope or fear. Leaders can build movements by appealing to a vision of what our country can be or by painting a picture of whom to blame and what to be afraid of.¹

Wallis goes on to argue that the results of the midterm elections—particularly the popularity of the self-described “Tea Party” candidates—reflect not only a growing number of politicians’ spiritual choice for fear over hope but, sadly, a growing number of voters’ choice of fear over hope.

Wallis’s comments aren’t simply partisan sour grapes. He’s talking about the type of rhetoric and the tone that politicians use to articulate their platforms—is that rhetoric fear-based or hope-filled? Is the candidate *for* anything, or simply *against* their opponent?

The results of the midterm elections, in Wallis’ view, reflect a shift in the populous from hope to fear in just two short years.

In some ways, I suppose this shift shouldn’t surprise us. We’ve seen these swings before. I think they are largely a by-product of the recession and the slow pace at which our economy is recovering from that recession. People tend to vote their pocketbooks. When asked, “Am I better off now than two years ago or four years ago?” many Americans answer “No,” if they are only thinking about their pocketbooks.

¹ <http://blog.sojo.net/2010/11/04/it-takes-a-movement-a-post-election-analysis/>

Still, as people of faith, we know that hope is based on more than a wallet full of money. Hope is a spiritual phenomenon that can help people persevere and overcome economic hardship and social strife.

As the late Harvey Milk famously said when running for San Francisco Supervisor, "You've gotta give 'em hope!" He understood better than many the complex role that political leaders can play in public life if they have the spiritual values and will to do so.

Now more than ever, I believe, we need not only politicians, but leaders in every sector of society to step forward and inspire hope rather than foster fear. Jim Wallis knows that, and so did the author of Ephesians.

II

The Ephesians needed a sense of hope in order to overcome persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities and the local merchants, and to face their own internal strife resulting from their heterogeneous makeup.

The Christians in Ephesus and elsewhere were a convenient scapegoat for Roman authorities when things were not going well in the kingdom, because they were a small, distinctive minority group who could easily be blamed and who could not adequately defend themselves in the wake of persecution.

The early Christians in Ephesus were also the target of what you might call the chamber of commerce. According to New Testament scholar, Charles H. Miller, the Christians in Ephesus were a threat to the local economy, because they would not purchase the talismans made by local silversmiths that depicted Roman gods.² Imagine the economic impact if a monotheistic religion that opposed graven images took hold in an economy that had been based in part on the production and sale of talismans depicting the several gods in the Roman pantheon.

In addition to the external threats that the Christian Ephesians faced, they had their own internal strife to contend with. The church at Ephesus was very diverse, and while that diversity was considered ideal by apostolic standards, people's social and cultural differences were often grounds for misunderstandings, jealousies, and disagreements within and among congregations.

So as far as we can tell from reading the New Testament, life in the early Christian church was no picnic—not in Ephesus or anywhere else. It was merely a variation of the kinds of conflict that we've heard about and experienced throughout the centuries and in our own time.

² Charles H. Miller, "Ephesus," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) p. 272. C.f., Acts 19:23–41 which describes the silversmith's opposition to Paul's teaching in which he said "their [the Roman] gods are no gods," and Gaius and Aristarchus imprisonment on account of their adherence to Paul's teachings.

Rather than dwelling on their hardships or staying mired in their differences, the author of Ephesians encouraged his audience to focus on the future and the hope that was offered to them through Christ.

Yesterday, I was at a Kindergarten soccer match, and was interested to see that before each half, one of the coaches asked all the players on both teams to point toward the goal that they were running toward.

This exercise reminded me of a comment made by a colleague of mine, the Rev. Gary Gunderson, who was US Ambassador to Angola during the Carter administration, and, at the time, a Kindergarten soccer coach for one of his children. I got to know him through work on an ecumenical leadership project, and when he keynoted a convention on faith and health for health care executives that I organized in St. Louis several years ago.

In that address, Gary explained that one of the most important things that leaders do—whether they are coaching Kindergarten soccer or leading multi-million dollar health care systems—is to get the attention of everyone on the team, and make sure that they all know which goal they are aiming for and which goal they are defending.

This was one of the objectives of the apostle who wrote to the Christians at Ephesus. He was trying to get them to focus on the goal—to see the hope—to which they were aiming. In the case of Ephesians, the goal was future-oriented and positive, and it was expressed in the form a prayer. See the fourth paragraph of today's reading where we read the following:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

I love these phrases and the apostle's choice of metaphors to describe hope and the impact that hope has on our hearts and our lives. The apostle explains the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of our hearts and enlightens them, so that we might know God's hope for us, both in this life and the life to come.

For the Ephesians, the medium was the message. Even as the apostle prayed for the members of this fledgling congregation, he fanned into flames the people's hope with his inspiring words that gave them a clearer picture of their purpose—of what goal they were aiming for—and he underscored this point with the example of his faithfulness.

III

In his blog this past week, Jim Wallis argued that we need more leaders on the American political landscape that will use their words to describe and inspire our nation to work toward a future that is hope-filled for all people, rather than a future that is fed by a sense of scarcity and a fear of the other.

I agree with Wallis' analysis, and go a step further than he does to say that I believe that we not only need *politicians* who choose hope over fear, we need people in *every sector of society* to choose hope over fear.

To paraphrase Ephesians 1, we need the eyes of our hearts enlightened, so that we may know the hope to which we are called.

We need this enlightenment, we need this hope, we need a keener sense of what the goal is, and the inspiration to aim for it.

I suspect that you agree with me, but how? How do we experience this hope, and how do we operate out of this hope?

IV

The apostle's writing suggests that we gain clarity of the goal and inspiration to aim for through prayer, through the examples of our forebears in the faith, and, ultimately, through Christ's own gift of grace to us.

So that we might better learn from today's epistle reading, let's reflect for a moment on our own experience.

1. What is the hope to which you were called? What is your life's purpose, your *raison d'être*?

The apostle assumes that God has imbued each and every one of us with a particular vocation and an ultimate purpose beyond this life. The author explains in Ephesians that our ultimate purpose has already been determined by God.

Our purpose is to receive God's love and grace and to enjoy these gifts on earth and in heaven. So our task on earth is to discern our purpose and to run toward it with as much fierceness as the most determined Kindergarten soccer player.

If we are not sure what that goal is the apostle suggests that we start by grounding ourselves in prayer and worship, and he exemplifies the importance of this step by praying for the Ephesians.

2. *Who has prayed for you?*

If we already know what our purpose is in life, then we are blessed, and we can focus our energies on praying for others who have not yet achieved this clarity.

We are accustomed, in our tradition, to pray for persons who are ill or injured or for those who are dying and for their family and friends. This is a good practice, and we should keep doing it.

But there are also others in need of prayer, including our youth and young adults who are trying to discern their life's purpose and how to pursue it, and for adults who are in time of discontinuity—whose sense of what the goal has been for them may have been radically thwarted or challenged by some change that may be beyond their control.

3. *Consider whose example has opened the eyes of your heart, and enlightened you?*

If we already know what our purpose is in life, if you are already praying for others who are in a spiritual discernment process, then perhaps you remember who challenged you to look at life in a different way. Perhaps you remember who complicated your thinking, and who changed your mind, or who set you on a better path in life.

If you do, then be glad and give thanks, and look around and ask yourself this: Who in my life could use a little eye-opening, heart-opening, enlightenment now? Who taught you to choose hope over fear? Who might you be called to utter a word of hope to?

When you have a thought about who that person may be, speak up. Get on it. The world is in desperate need of your witness.

V

Jim Wallis was right when he said, "In politics there is always a spiritual choice to be made—to choose hope or fear." But I go a step further than he does. I believe that all of us—not just politicians—have a spiritual choice to make every day. The choice is between hope and fear. The choice that we make is an important faith statement, and it substantially influences our personal futures and the future of our planet.

We can be part of the movement that Christ began by appealing to a hope-filled vision of what our nation and world could be—a vision that assumes that peace is possible, that there is enough for everyone, and that "the other" is someone from whom we can learn and grow, rather than someone to fear and to eradicate.

We have a choice between hope and fear. The early apostles and the God we worship encourage us to pursue the calling to which we have been called, by saying our prayers and praying for others, by following the example of those who opened the eyes of our hearts and enlightened us, and by offering our own unique eye-opening, heart-enlightening witness for others.

My prayer for each of us today is that we choose hope over fear, and pursue God's hope with great passion. Amen.