Election Distress: Home for the Holidays Ken Wilson 11.20.16

Next Sunday is first of four Sundays in season called Advent. Advent means coming or impending arrival. Reference 3 comings: coming of a time of distress, of God into the world, and a better world. The coming distress part, we get, right?

In January, we'll have a president whose top advisor runs a major online outlet for anti-Semitism, white supremacy, anti-immigrant rhetoric. In schools across the country, reports of more blatant-than-usual harassment of minorities. Themes in advent readings are sober ones: wake up, be alert-prepared, be faithful-courageous, resist evil, don't' give in to fear, hold on to hope.

Today focus on a very practical concern many have shared with me: how do I deal with my family who seem not to see what I see? It's especially distressing when your family shares your faith but is supporting policies that you find completely at odds it.

At a time of distress & disorientation, access heart of faith. That unshakable core has also been called the Jesus ethic: "***Love your neighbor as yourself, for this is the law and the prophets"*** (see Mt.22: 38-40, Mk 12:31, Ro. 13: 8-10). When in doubt, Love your neighbor as yourself for this is the Law & the Prophets.

Love your neighbor as yourself is lifted from an obscure verse in Torah (Leviticus) that rose like cream in the milk pail. But **added clause** is important: ***for this is the Law & the Prophets*** (a term that refers the Bible in that time.) **What accounts for this framing?**

<u>Goes back to origin of Jesus movement</u>. Acting in accord with "***the law & the prophets"*** is what justified persecution of Jesus and his followers. Their distress was caused by a misuse of religion. The author of a third of NT was, before his conversion, guilty of persecuting Christians on religious grounds. After mending his ways, he suffered same treatment he doled out.

You know the saying, **"I'll never make that mistake again."** The mistake we dedicate our life to not making can end up defining us. The mistake that Paul and the other Jesus followers never wanted to repeat: using the Bible, to justify harming others. Jesus himself suffered in this way, so he added the "for this is the law & the prophets" clause to the Leviticus saying, Love your neighbor as yourself, and he made it the centerpiece of his ethic. Period.

<u>Whenever church forgets this, she strays</u>. Next year is the 500th anniversary of Luther's break from the power of Roman Church—beginning of Protestant Reformation. Watchword: *Sola Scriptura.* Scripture trumps the authority of the pope.

In Luther's Germany, peasants rebelled against oppression of landlords, using Scripture to support demands less radical than American revolution. Luther was incensed. He called for slaughter of peasants: *"Let everyone who can smite, slay, and stab [the peasants]…If you die in doing it, well for you! A more blessed death can never be yours, for you die in obeying the divine Word and commandment in Romans 13"* he wrote. Historian Carlos Eire reports, *"the landlords did precisely as Luther suggested, stabbing, smiting, and slaying about seventy-thousand to one hundred thousand rebels, most of them peasants.*"

When we criticize other religions for their extremists we have to remember our own.

A version of the love-your-neighbor saying is prominently placed in Sermon on Mount as summary. It defines the narrow path that leads to life as opposed to broad path that leads to destruction.
It goes: "***In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the Law & the Prophets"*** (Mt. 7:12) Mirrors "Love your neighbor as yourself, this is the Law & the Prophets" but "love your neighbor" is replaced by the sharper, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" Golden rule.

Love of neighbor requires an act of imagination. To practice this love we have to ask ourselves, **"How would I want to be treated if I were my neighbor?"** We picture ourselves as the neighbor. That's a profound act of identification with your neighbor.

Most religious systems offer a set of rules to guide behavior. Better than criminality and a big advance for human societies. But rules can be manipulated. This act of imagination is more powerful than any set of rules, applies in the subtleties of actual life, and tends to resist manipulation.

Golden rule is basis what we now call empathy: *Imagining yourself as the other, showing them the same sympathetic regard you have toward yourself, and responding to them accordingly.*

How do we apply this ethic if you are dreading going home for the holidays?

First, especially for those who are part of a targeted minority group dreading going home, don't assume that you have to.
Remember the "as yourself" clause of "love your neighbor"

Think of it from a communal perspective. The job of a family or community is to look out for everyone. If one member has an immediate need, we assume those closest to them will respond first. But even more, the community is counting on every person in the community to

practice self-care. No one is closer to you than you. I can't tell if you're thirsty: that's your job to say, "I'm thirsty" and get a drink, or ask for one, if you don't have water.

Your community, including your family, is counting on you to care for yourself. To know what your needs are, what is reasonable to expect, especially when these needs may be invisible to them. So it's **perfectly in keeping with the Jesus ethic** for you say, "You know what? It's too early, I'm too raw, the chance of closing the gap with my family too low right now. I'm going to skip."

You also have option to establish some ground rules for a family visit. You could say, "I'm really hurting over this election. If you can't respect that and be considerate, I'll have to miss this time." You could say, "This is too big a deal for me to ignore when I'm home. I need to tell you how this has affected me. But I'm only willing to do that if you are willing to listen without pressuring me with your views. Can you do that?"

Second, especially for those in majority: take the memory of a targeted person home with you for the holidays. And don't forget them when the family talks about the election.

If I were a targeted person with white-straight friends, what would matter to me most, is not the support they give me in person, but whether or not they remember me when they are with other majority people, especially those deaf to my concerns.

That's the kind of act of imagination we have to practice. I had a **powerful experience of this** mediated, I believe, by the Spirit.

Years ago, when I led an evangelical church and was re-thinking LGBT, I was well along the path to inclusion, but hadn't worked out all the implications. An influential couple in church met with me, distressed about my evolving views: asked me point blank if I would do a gay wedding. Since I hadn't crossed that line yet, I was tempted to give a technically correct answer. I loved these people didn't want to lose them, major contributors.
In split second I pondered my response, I felt, almost saw it was so vivid, Lisa Ruby in the room with me listening to my response. So I said, "I have to acknowledge that the logic of my position is that I will perform such a wedding."

It doesn't matter much if we're allies in the presence of our friends if we fudge behind closed doors.

Those of us in majority culture have a responsibility to speak up. Part of waking up is speaking up. It's not a virtue to keep the peace when the peace is at the expense of oppressed people.

For that we need: **wisdom and nerve,** but nerve comes first, then wisdom. Jesus had lots of wisdom about when to speak and how—he could be winsome, tell stories to make his point, all that. Maybe you don't need to speak up with your 94 y.o. grandmother. But you don't get the wisdom if you don't start with a little courage, which means wiliness to speak up.

Reading today is Jesus on cross with two thieves. Elite religious leaders are accusing, Romans accusing him, most bystanders remain silent. Even the one thief mirrors their mockery of him. But other thief, in hearing of all, tells his fellow thief to back off: *we're guilty but this man is innocent!* Do you know how it feels to have someone speak up for you in the face of opposition? That was the last comfort Jesus had in his suffering before he died.

Don't argue politics: **bear witness**. Tell what targeted people in your life are going through knowing that the funder of a white supremacy website is top advisor to man who soon be President.

Don't re-litigate the election and their voting decisions. Assume, as Lisa did in her ty. last week, that your family members had their reasons that they held with integrity. But call them to stand with you in standing up for your friends. If campaign talk of creating a registry for all Muslims materializes, tell them you're going to sign up for the registry and they should to. Don't make it about the vote, make it about the "What now?"

Third, express your emotions directly, but always, respecting the human dignity of others as those who bear the image of God.

Attempts to hide or suppress the emotions stirred by this election will only put you in a no-win game of **whack-a-mole**. A feeling will pop up, you'll hammer it down, and it will pop up somewhere else.
So just express your emotions: *I'm feeling distressed, angry, sad, afraid,* whatever it is. Seven universal human emotions, with facial expressions that hold across all cultures for each:
Anger, Fear, Sadness, Disgust, Enjoyment, Surprise, Contempt.

Let's talk about the first on that list and the last: anger and contempt. Because they feel similar but are very different.

Starting with contempt. Gottman marriage research (contempt, not anger is predictive of divorce.)

In Romans 14 the relational sin of conservative is **judgment**. For the liberal it's **contempt**. Anger can be expressed with full respect for the dignity of the other. When we express anger we're saying: *you matter; what you're doing is hurting me or others, please stop*. Not

contempt: the nature of contempt is dismissing the other person. *You don't matter. I'm writing you off*

We are called to oppose anything that threatens human dignity.
That includes our own contempt. There is such a thing as "liberal group think contempt." A2 is most educated city in country. Ask those who don't have a college degree if they sometimes feel that around here. Pundits repeated mantra: Democrats have support of white college-educated women; Republicans strong with white non-college educated voter.
Pundits who quote this, are all college-educated. Lots of people heard that mantra as code for "we think you're stupid." Contempt fuels disconnection.

Anger is different than contempt. Some families avoid open expressions of anger. Anger tends to be indirect, passive-aggressive. Because it's such a powerful emotion, afraid to express it. But families are not harmed by direct, non-hostile expression of anger. ***"Be angry, but do not sin."***

Sometimes people impose anger to impose their will. But there's such a thing as **revealing** your anger, part of being yourself in your family. If you're angry, say so and explain what's behind it—what specifically angers you? Usually it's the threat to human dignity of people you care about. That's healthy. Say it.

Close with a meditation to face our fears with God.

Get your grounding in God before you go home for holidays. Purpose of fear is to get our attention, but if we don't get some God-comfort, it can narrow our focus, make us stupid.

Lot's of "don't be afraid" talk is Pollyanna. False comfort of those with little to fear given to those with lots to fear. That is not the "don't' be afraid" talk of Scripture. It's we're jumping out of the airplane now, don't be afraid. We're walking thru fire, don't be afraid. We're walking on water, don't be afraid.

Caroline will lead us in a meditation now…