

Rev. Dr. Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Matthew 16: 1-4; Mark 13: 33; Colossians 4: 2-5
November 17, 2024

Let Us Not Talk Falsely Now: On Kairos and Community

“Let us not talk falsely now,
The hour is getting late.”

-Bob Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower”

Last week we gathered by the side of the Nile with Miriam, watching as a current carried her infant brother into an unknown future. It was a way of situating ourselves within our own present, seeking to understand the current that is swirling around us, while preparing ourselves for what is coming.

We’re still there in the bulrushes with Miriam, and we may be there for a while yet, seeking to understand where this current is flowing. In the meantime, we’re having to learn how to speak clearly, without inflicting harm. We’re having to search for places to steady ourselves, because the ground has shifted beneath our feet. My offering today is an attempt to provide some kind of orientation, at least for the time being. It won’t please everyone, but speaking pleasant words has never been the preacher’s sole task. We’re charged to tell the truth, a telling which is always provisional, always fragmentary, and always limited by our own finitude. And so what I offer you today are the provisions I am discovering down here in the bulrushes. They have helped to orient me, and I hope they might do so for you too.

I’ll begin with a telling feature of the conversations I’ve been having over the past ten days. They’ve taken place in different locations around town - the church, the supermarket, a rural road. “How are you doing,” I’ll ask. Invariably the response is “I’m doing fine.” But then I’ll say something further, like, “it’s been quite a week, huh?” After that, the air seems to shift, and the conversation opens up. And over and over again, eyes start welling with tears. These aren’t the tears of disappointment. These aren’t the tears of oh so tender hearts who can’t cope with a loss. These tears are very different.

If I had to guess, I think they represent unbidden memories that are surfacing all over again, conjured by the once and future President. They represent the unwanted memories of what it is like to experience sexual harassment, or what it’s like to be bullied. They represent the searing pain of what it once felt like, what it still feels like, to be called derogatory names or to be shamed by laughter. They represent what it is to be mocked for one’s sexual preference, or to be taunted for not conforming to straight gender norms. They represent the terror of having been targeted for abuse because of one’s racial, ethnic or cultural identity. For some, perhaps, the tears represent the bitterness of having actually survived sexual assault. I can’t say for sure, but I imagine the tears I have seen are the embodied response of the traumas that so many people have been forced to carry inside, traumas now being resurrected all over again.

To the old traumas, new ones are being added. You’ve read the stories, I’m sure, but after a man who proudly identifies as a neo-Nazi posted “Your body, my choice” on social media the day after the election, young men around the country have taken to repeating it. I’ve now heard that the phrase was used here in the past week, at the high school. This is America: a neo-

Nazi slogan has now become common speech among children. The tears I have witnessed are, I believe, a reflection of that reality too.

But then I've also had conversations with a number of our immigrant friends, and while they're putting on a brave face, all of them, every last one of them, is deeply afraid of what will happen either to them, or to their communities. They've heard the portents, and they know what is coming. The story is in their eyes, in their tears, too.

Meanwhile, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, together with most every other mainstream media outlet, are doing their best to treat this time as normal. That may be commendable in a way, but I must tell you that from my vantage as a minister, from my vantage as a parent, and from my vantage as a citizen, this is not normal.

Let it be said in the churches, or at least in this church if nowhere else: this is not normal.

All of this raises a pressing and necessary question: who or what is the church of Jesus Christ called to be in this time? Who or what are we at the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme called to be in this era? What kind of place is this going to be? How are we going to show up for ourselves, for our community, and for the world around us?

Perhaps the first and simplest thing to say is that we shall continue to do what we affirm in the benediction every week: we shall have courage. We shall hold on to what is good. We shall return no one evil for evil. We shall strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, and help the suffering. And we shall honor all people. It means we'll demonize no one, shame no one, look down upon no one for the choices they made in the electoral booth. But we will and we must speak forthrightly about the repercussions of that event. The door is now open to the further erosion of democratic norms, the reversal of basic human rights, the elimination of safety for whole populations, the suppression of the rule of law, and the normalization of extreme behaviors. We're going to have to work incredibly hard if we are to remain a church worthy of the name.

That means we'll need a more robust framework to answer the question of who and what we wish to be. One of the places I have turned for that framework is to the Kairos Document, written by a group of South African theologians and ministers forty years ago. It's remarkably prescient, and in the time that remains, I'd like to share a few of its key insights with you.

It turns on two understandings of time running through the New Testament: *chronos* time and *kairos* time. *Chronos* is easy to understand. It's clock time, a sequence of things that happen one after another. *Kairos* is different, and richer by far. It means the opportune time, the appropriate time, the urgent time. *Kairos* is existential - it requires one's passionate involvement, seizing the moment. And it requires discernment and careful observation.

In our Scripture passage from Matthew, for example, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees because they lack powers of discernment. They can read weather patterns, but they can't read the signs of the times - the *kairos*. We might say that they weren't doing cultural analysis or reading their social context, a crucial theological skill. Just as the South African document presses its readers in the apartheid era to discern their *kairos*, it urges upon us the work of discerning our own time.

The Document goes on to describe three ways that churches have tended to respond to their own *kairos* moments throughout history: they practice a kind of state theology, a kind of church theology, or a prophetic theology. They represent three ways for us to be the church right now. I'll say a brief word about each.

State theology is based on a simplistic reading of Romans 13, which argues that God has granted authorities the right to govern. In this line of thinking, just as people are to be obedient

to God, so subjects are to be obedient to state power. It tends to be used as a way to baptize the status quo, blessing and condoning any number of injustices because it's been ordained by God. State theology uses words like "communist" and "socialist" for anyone who challenges prevailing economic orthodoxies. And it's highly invested in law and order, willing to use violence to maintain its authority, even as it denounces forms of violence that are not its own.

State theology is what we now call Christian nationalism. It has been advanced by white evangelical churches of late, but certain versions of State theology persist in Mainline churches, especially around national holidays. Given all that we've seen by now, it's time to renounce State theology and its many corollaries once and for all. God has not blessed the white race, nor has God blessed capitalism. God has not blessed the prosperous. And God has not blessed the United States. To say such things of God is to make of God an idol. That God is opposite of the God of the Bible, who, we should recall, is revealed not in signs of power, wealth, or nation, but in the wounds of a suffering man. Toward the God of State theology, I can and do declare my own atheism.

Shall FCCOL practice a form of State theology? I would hope not.

Then there is church theology, which cuts close to home. Church theology is nominally true to certain features of the Christian tradition, but in ways that risk little, doing little more than uphold an institution. According to the Kairos Document, you know you're in the presence of church theology when you hear lots of talk about reconciliation, about justice, about nonviolence, and about peace. Those words sound right, but in church theology they're used to neutralize any and all conflicts, which in many cases winds up perpetuating injustice. In the Civil Rights Movement, for example, church theology argued for reconciliation between black and white people, without ever addressing the structural injustices within U.S. society. In the anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, church theology argued for nonviolence in the Townships without ever addressing the multiple forms of violence being used to uphold apartheid itself. In current discussions about Gaza, church theology would denounce the violence of both Gaza and Israel as if it were the same violence, perpetrated by equals, without ever bothering to do a structural and historical analysis of that situation. Faced with declining membership and revenue streams, church theology has had a paralyzing effect on Mainline congregations, as clergy wish to avoid giving offense. Meanwhile, faith communities lose their moral voice, their relevance, and their ability to lead. Kairos passes them by, in the name of peace, in the name of reconciliation.

And so shall FCCOL practice a form of church theology in this kairos moment? We have, at times. But I think the Spirit of God summons us to something more.

Here I turn to prophetic theology, the third option available to churches, and to us. Prophetic theology is harder to discern because usually it is a temporary condition. It is human beings in the power of the Holy Spirit during specific times and places, like the time of abolition movement, like the time of the Civil Rights and anti-apartheid struggles; like the time of Latin American liberation theology in the sixties and seventies. It was this congregation after 9/11, when many of you chose to work on behalf of human rights in Palestine and Israel, and it was many of us, again, seven years ago when we became a Sanctuary congregation.

Prophetic theology is biblical to the core, rooted especially in the teachings of Jesus, but it mixes biblical insight with deep social analysis. Prophetic theology affirms that God stands first and foremost with the suffering, even as it seeks ways to turn mourning into dancing. It is grounded in hope, even as it remains transfixed by the pressing needs of the present. Prophetic theology seeks allies wherever it finds them, even as it strives to remain true to its own

theological values. Prophetic theology is loving, even as it challenges its listeners to critical self examination and repentance. Prophetic theology is public and out loud, even as it affirms the private and quiet corners within the human soul. Prophetic theology is humble, knowing that it will get some things wrong, even as it finds the courage to speak truths that need to be spoken. Above all, prophetic theology is active, understanding that contemplation follows upon living what we believe.

I would hope we'll have the courage at FCCOL to make the most of this time, this kairos, practicing new and creative forms of prophetic theology. I hope that for churches all across the country, and indeed, all around the world.

I'll close with a thought experiment. What would our own Kairos statement look like, if we were to write it? Such things are best written in community, and they tend to come from the poorest and most marginal places on the planet - far from a place like Old Lyme in other words. Even so, I wonder what we might say were we to be so moved by the Spirit of the living God.

Here's something of a start, a place to land for the time being.

1. You are not alone. If you feel lost, overwhelmed, or frightened, there is a community here that will have your back, and that will help you to get through the darkest moments. If you are lonely, there are people who will support you. This is the meaning of church in this kairos moment.
2. Your tears are valuable. They are telling you truths your mind may not have caught up to yet. And so we will pay attention to the tremors of spirit revealed in our tears. But we will also pay attention to the tremors of being emerging from those whose lives have been made most vulnerable in this time: the trans community, the lesbian and gay community, immigrants, and countless others whose lives feel tenuous. This is the meaning of Jesus in this kairos moment.
3. Your skepticism about God is important. It may be keeping you free from the blandishments of white Christian nationalism, together with its God. We renounce such a God. Even so, we affirm a transcendent reality that belongs to no geography, to no chosen people, to no class, to no caste. We affirm that this transcendent reality, this God beyond God, is drawing us beyond all nationalisms, all tribalisms, urging us to find our common humanity with one another. This is the meaning of God in our kairos moment.
4. Your joy, your creativity, and your sense of play will keep you human. The way to cast out the devil, Martin Luther said, is with laughter. And so laugh. Against all forms of fascist control, we affirm the power of communal celebration, of joyous music making, freely given aid, and of bodies mixing and mingling and loving in uninhibited ways. This is the meaning of Spirit in our kairos moment.
5. Your whole life matters. You are a complex being made up of many different parts, all of them good. Your work, your values, your economic situation, your family life, your interior world that no one else sees but you - there is no part of you that is not graced, and no part of you that is not being coaxed toward greater works of love. This is the meaning of salvation in our kairos moment.
6. Your love of the natural world and of non-human creatures is beautiful. We affirm the opening verses of Scripture, which declare that the world and everything in it, including humans, is worthy of care. And so we celebrate ecology and the sciences, together with other forms of expertise and learning. We

revel in the span of the cosmos, and we are awestruck by the cellular and the subatomic. This is the meaning of the doctrine of creation in our kairos moment.

That's something of what I would say by way of starting our own Kairos statement. It's provisional and fragmentary, like everything I have said this morning. What I hope is that it orients us, at least a little. What I hope is that it gives us a framework about the kind of church we're called to be. What I hope is that it leads us to make the most of our kairos, our time, as we respond prophetically to the needs around and within us.

Let us not talk falsely now. The hour - the kairos - is getting late. Guided by our faith, we shall meet this moment with boldness and resolve. Amen.