

Rev. Andy Nagy-Benson
Date: 11.13.2016
Isa. 65:17-25

Loss. Grief. Hope. Action.

I'm told you can put a million grains of sand in a coffee cup.
Allowing for variation in the size of the cups
and in the volume of the grains
it's possible to put a million grains of sand in a coffee cup.

So, imagine 59 coffee cups full of sand
piled high on this wing of the pulpit.

And while you're at it,
imagine 59 coffee cups full of sand
stacked up on that wing of the pulpit.

118 coffee cups of sand is a lot to imagine.
You're doing great!

Now, fill another cup three-quarters full with sand
and put it on the LEFT.

And fill one last cup half full with sand
and put it on the RIGHT.

You are now looking at 120 coffee cups of sand.

The difference in the total number of grains of sand
between this side and that side
is just one-quarter of a coffee cup.
In other words — there isn't much difference at all.

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Well, based on the 57% of American adults
who went to all the trouble to vote for a Presidential candidate,
that one quarter-cup of sand is the difference
in the number of votes cast for Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump.

So, at least when it comes to the popular vote,
there wasn't much difference at all.

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But if you think of it,
that near even-split does reflect back to us
what we probably knew already.

There are deep differences among us.
Different visions for how to be in the world.
Different visions for how to care for the Earth.

Different understandings of the value of every person
with respect to their gender
and what they look like
and where they're from
and how they worship
and whom they love.

These differences are real.
And they matter a lot.

Which is why blue waves of dread crashed on Wednesday
in this community and in communities across the land.

Just as red waves of dread would have likely crashed
had Mrs. Clinton won the election.

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So, what do we do now?
What do we do now?

In 19 years of pastoral ministry,
I have heard that sad, serious, communal question
only two times.

The week after 9/11.
And this week.

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So, what do we do now?

Well, for starters, we do what we do.

Our mission here is “to live as Jesus taught,
loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Those words appear on the front page of our worship bulletin every Sunday.

They are still there today.
They are not going anywhere.

And, as it turns out, those words have been around awhile.

“Love God” —
that’s in the Book of Deuteronomy, written 2600 years ago.

“Love your neighbor as yourself” —
that’s in Leviticus, written 2600 years ago.

Those words call us to do what we do.

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What do we do now?

We welcome everyone who walks through those doors.

We say: No matter who you are you are welcome here.

And we hang a rainbow banner out front,
so that members of the wider community
who have been made to feel like they are less than children of God
can know that when it comes to keeping score in this place ... LOVE WINS.

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What do we do now?

We jump in to the work of Charter House Coalition.

We do everything we can for those who feel dislocated
from the socket of belonging.

We help serve 28,000 meals a year.

We sit with and listen to and care for
our guests in the Winter Shelter and the Day Station at Charter House.

What we do is we lean into God’s dream of well-being for all.

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What do we do now?

We keep lighting the candles on this altar.
We keep singing.
We keep checking in with each other.

We keep affirming the value of every one of the 50-plus teenagers
who walks into Youth Group on Sunday Night.

What keep seeing — *really seeing* — our sons and daughters.
We keep telling them:
I love you. God loves you.
Keep growing. Keep going.

What we do now is what we've been trying to do every day.

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But there's something else — something more.

You see, the space between us —
the space between those 120 coffee cups of sand —
is much wider than the width of this pulpit.

Maybe it's a male-female thing.
An urban-rural thing.
A have-have not thing.
A white-nonwhite thing.
An educated-undereducated thing.
A been-here-a-while — just-got-here thing.

A lot of things can get in the way
of our knowing each other
in this county and country.

Which leaves us with yet more to do.

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I'm thinking
it's time to listen to voices I've missed.

It's time for a new reading list.
J.D. Vance's book, "Hillbilly Elegy," is on that list.

Vance is 32 years old.
He grew up in Middletown, Ohio —
a small town in the southwest corner of that state.

A place that knows the woes of America's Rust Belt.
A place where people have been losing jobs and hope for decades.

A place where the misery index —
measured by divorce, domestic violence, drug abuse, unemployment —
is totally off the charts.

A place where Vance's mother was married five times
before she fell into heroin and homelessness.

I don't know that place.

I don't know what it's like to grow up in a community
riven by cultural isolation and anger and feelings of futility.

I have some homework to do.

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That work also includes books like *THE UNWINDING*.
And, *STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND*.

And even more,
it includes seeking out conversation partners
who see things differently than I.

Based on the blips of hate speech
in the hallways of our high school on Wednesday.

Based on the blips of xenophobic graffiti at the College.

Based on the TRUMP bumpersticker I read but cannot repeat,
I don't think I need to take a road trip to southwest Ohio
to have those conversations.

They are waiting for the us here
if we can find the courage to go there.

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Now, alongside this,
I'm also thinking that a community-wide conversation on race is overdue.

Vermont is 95.2% white.
We are tied with Maine for the highest percentage of white people
in the United States.

Which makes most of us perfect candidates to learn
what we do not know.

What I have in mind
is a course of study — put out by the UCC —
called *WHITE PRIVILEGE*.

I can imagine diving into that with you.
And with people of neighboring faith communities.
With anybody, really.

I've assigned part one of that curriculum
to the Board of Directors of the Vermont Conference (UCC).
We'll be exploring it together at our next meeting next month.

It has to do with seeing our lives and telling our stories
through the lens of race.

What I have read so far has opened my eyes.

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And don't eye-opening moments like that
lie the heart of God's HOPE for us?

In Isaiah 65, God's vision consists of sights
that we have not seen
and would not expect to see.

Wolf and lamb grazing the same meadow.
Lion and ox eating straw from the same trough.

That sounds like holy poetry to me.

It sounds to me like a call to action.

A sacred call
to do justice and love kindness
with unlikely partners.

A sacred call
to stand with people who are — right now —
afraid for their safety in this land of the free.

A scared call

to be some small part
of the healing we all need.

A sacred call
to be part of God's love-rich work on earth.

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What do we do now?

We answer the call any way we can.
In every way we can.
And we keep at it.

Because that is what we do.

Amen.

Author's note: I am indebted to Jennifer Senior's review of J.D. Vance's book. Her article, "In 'Hillbilly Elegy,' a Tough Love Analysis of the Poor Who Back Trump" appeared in *The New York Times* on August 10, 2016.