

Via Media Sunday

March 7, 2010: Ex. 3:1-15; Ps. 63:1-8; I Corinth. 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

The Rev. Peter Faass

Polarization seems to be the trendy term used to describe our nation's current governing state of affairs these days. Maybe paralyzed is a more apt description; opposites are often known to attract. The only thing that most members of our Congress seem attracted to these days is vituperative commentary, not bi-partisanship.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the majority of those elected to lead at all levels of government have little or no desire to actually do so. Locked in perpetual battle to gain even the slightest advantage over one another, the only concern members of both the Republican and Democratic parties seem to have is to gain political ground and raise funds for the next election cycle. "Government for the people," has been rendered a quaint anachronism.

While those elected to govern are mired in this morass of self-serving endeavors, the American people are caught up in what will be one of the most critical junctures in our nation's history: we languish in rising un-employment and an apparently jobless recovery from the current recession. Our health care system can't cure its own cancer of escalating costs and utterly fails to find ways to provide complete coverage for all people. Ethics and morality in banking and investment are in tatters; the leaders of those institutions thumbing their noses at the rest of the nation as they abscond with billions in bonuses. We face the real prospect that China will soon overtake us both economically and in educational excellence. The eco-system of this fragile earth our island home is a decade or so away from the tipping point of no-return from global warming. And the very real possibility of a second wave of home foreclosures looms is on the horizon. Yet amazingly our elected leaders seem either immune from recognizing the seriousness of our situation or are impotent in being able to address any of these critical issues facing our people. In the midst of these challenging times, our attention deficient culture pendulums back and forth from ninety to one hundred and eighty degrees faster than Shani Davis in the 1000 meter men's speed skating event at Vancouver two weeks ago. (1.08.94 Gold medal) The majority of us are fickle, impatient, self-serving and un-willing to sacrifice so much as an iota of what we have for the greater good. How did we ever get from hope to Tea Party reactionaries in just one year?

If ever there were fig trees not producing any fruit and unworthy of continuing to simply suck up nutrients, it would be the current U.S. Federal government and the general state of American society today. In the Gospel parable, we heard from Luke this morning that Jesus tells the story of the un-productive and unworthy fig tree.

A man plants a fig tree in his vineyard and coming to look for fruit on it and found none. He says to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" The gardener replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

First century Jews would have quickly recognized the fig tree as a popular symbol for Israel. The owner of the vineyard in which it grows is God, and the gardener is Jesus. In a nut shell, the parable conveys God's displeasure with the Jewish people, who despite the care God provides for them, will not produce the fruit of obeying God's ways. Jesus argues for making one last attempt to turn this peoples hearts back toward God and to be faithful. And he does so by advocating applying fertilizer for one more season to see if that will induce the fruit that God desires.

The fertilizer Jesus will apply is the good news; the good news of wanton love of neighbor, unlimited forgiveness and compassion for all, and the radical embrace and inclusion of all people. Jesus will do this with the hope that Israel - the fig tree - will produce these very same fruits in their lives. But if in a year's time they do not respond to this nurturing, well as they say, they're history.

With this understanding of the scripture it is easy to draw parallels from Jesus' story and apply them to our current national

circumstances. Frankly, I do not believe that God is any more pleased with our behavior as a people and our current paralyzed, self-serving government, than God was with the people of Israel in the first century; neither is producing any fruit! Theologically speaking, I think we have very little time left in which to apply the values of the good news to our non-productive fig trees before those trees get cut down. Ironically, *because we know what is required* to remedy our circumstances, if our fig trees do not produce fruit, we will be the one's who end up wielding the ax of our own destruction. Our un-doing will be our own fault.

Two Sundays ago the *New York Times Magazine* (February 14, 2010) featured a cover article titled, "How Christian Were the Founders? History Wars: Inside America's Textbook Battles." The article, written by Russell Shorto, focused on how the Texas State Board of Education is currently revising the content of the textbooks it uses, in particular science and history texts. A battle is taking place between Christian conservatives and more reasoned voices on the Board over such issues as evolution versus creationism and intelligent design as well as what the intent of the founding fathers was as they formed these United States? Were we to be an exclusively Christian nation -- or a more pluralistic society?

Gail Lowe, the chair of the Texas Board, who is one of the conservative Christians, said this in the article. "Many of us recognize that Judeo-Christian principles were the basis of our country and that many of the founding documents had a basis in Scripture. As we try to promote a better understanding of the Constitution, federalism, the separation of the branches of government, the basic rights guaranteed in the Bills of Rights, I think it will become evident to students that the founders had a religious motivation."

One of the most significant factors contributing to our nations current state of paralyze has been the efforts of conservative/fundamentalist Christians to exert their particular theological beliefs into our political system over the past two decades. As a result, one political party has tried with moderate success to co-opt the religious right for its own purposes and the other party has had a knee-jerk reaction to right wing religious activism and has worked diligently to expel all religious voices from its midst. Both of these approaches have failed to meet the national interest. Both have been disastrous for the national interest.

The Founding Fathers clearly were influenced - both positively and negatively - by their faith and the history of religious involvement in government when they wrote the Bill of Rights and the Constitution, but it was not in the manner that the Christian conservatives believe. Their actual religious motivation, which Lowe refers to, that formed the founders was the ethos that formed Anglicanism. Many of those men were Anglican - at least nominally - and they all were influenced by the culture of the British nation, which was in large part formed in the crucible of Anglican Christianity. That ethos which shaped them is one of the core doctrines of Anglicanism; the *via media*. *Via media* is Latin for middle way. The concept of *via media* was developed by the Anglican theologian Richard Hooker during the reign of Elizabeth I, who for all practical purposes was the founder of the Anglican Church.

Originally *via media* helped define Anglicanism because of its rather unique ability to bridge of the gap between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Since then it has permeated all things Anglican and has been an invaluable context within which we have worked during times of divergent opinions, controversies, strife and the threat of schism.

Via media demands consideration of opposing opinions and voices. It requires patient and considerate listening and response. Theologically it strives to hear how God is at work in our lives and discern what God desires most for us. While some might see *via media* as nothing more than a fancy term for the art of the compromise, it truly is a gift of grace; allowing we fractious humans to find a way to co-exist together and work for the common good. *Via media* demands civility and respect for those holding opposition ideologies. And finally, and maybe most critically, it seeks the best possible result for all people involved.

The Founding Fathers were steeped in the concept of *via media* and they brought that concept to bear on the formation and structure of our nation. One only need look at the history of our nation to see how *via media* has influenced our growth and development.

Regrettably the *via media* has fallen victim to the self-serving needs of our government and our people. Its absence has led to

our current polarization where people can't even bear to be in the same room together, never mind talk and reason civilly. But imagine if we could resurrect this invaluable way of working together both as a government and as a nation. Imagine the possibilities for moving this nation out of the morass we are currently in.

You and I and this Anglican faith tradition that we hold, can be powerful witnesses on how to prevent that ax which hangs over the trunk of the unproductive fig trees from falling. In so doing we become that one more year of reprieve God granted the gardener. And maybe, just maybe, the fertilizer of the good news that we apply will make a difference in this world. Personally, I can't think of a more Christian way to love our country.

Amen.