

*“Saints and the Election”*

*Mark S. Burrows  
Professor of the History of Christianity  
Andover Newton Theological School*

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Texts: Ps. 46; 2 Cor. 6.1-13

In the beginning, however we can imagine this, there was a world in the anguish of birthing. A groaning of the earth, and the wild chaos of the deep; the strange emergence and proliferation of life forms, including human, and the inevitable struggle between self-interest and self-sacrifice – one that scientists from the fields of cellular biology and cultural anthropology have chronicled with increasing fascination. Why *should* there be any act of generosity toward others? Why not the “survival of the fittest,” without regard for the weak and vulnerable? Why not pure selfishness and greed, the utterly exclusive protection of one’s self and one’s own tribe? Why not such a *hell* as the pattern of surviving, if not flourishing?

In the beginning, or at least in the midst of this unfolding drama, there has been a strange resistance to this pattern. In the beginning, and all along the way, there have always been saints. Saints who dared to imagine that the familiar and the certain, the secure and the traditional, were not the final word. Saints who dared to imagine that fear is often the first but never the last word. Saints who were crazy enough to hold onto hope not as the consequence of success but as a subversive witness to a larger and more generous future. Saints who were brazen enough to believe that love is its own reward, despite the suffering and sacrifice love will call for.

In the beginning, or at least on this day when we gather ourselves as a nation on the other side of a bitter campaign, God has one word for us. It is not a word of self-congratulation, or of defeat. It is not a word of blame or discouragement. It is a strange and wonderful word of comfort and command, given to people in a time of desolation. It is a word of hope given to those who had come to despair in the Lord’s favor. It is a word from the ancient prophet Isaiah (ch. 49), a word Paul brought to the early Christians

gathered in the community at Corinth, a group broken with dissension and polarized by divisions (2 Cor. 6.1ff.):

At the acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and helped you on the day of salvation.

And the apostle adds, reminding this community that the text was not about a past promise or a distant God:

*Behold! Now is the acceptable time!*  
*Behold! Now is the day of salvation!*

He had not just been part of a losing campaign. His candidate for imperial governor had not been defeated by a rival. He had not been humbled by a majority voting in another direction. And he had apparently never figured that the way of Christians would be one of privilege, power, and pride.

No, Paul tells us of his life:

. . .as servants of God, we commend ourselves. . .  
through great endurance, in affliction, hardships, calamities,  
beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger;

As servants, bearing witness to the gospel path – which was a calling on an often difficult road. And how does Paul suggest we bear witness? By political strategies, and action plans? Perhaps, although he remains silent about methods. What he is clear about is purpose:

. . .by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness,  
the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech,  
and the power of God...

And he concludes with an assurance: “Our mouth is open to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. . . Widen your hearts, also!”

Widen your hearts.

You see, Paul did not imagine that saints on this earth would be docile, quiet, or retiring. He did not retreat into fear, or regret; he did not indulge in self-satisfied anger, or blame. *Widen your hearts.*

No, he stood up in the way of Jesus, and all the prophets. He spoke out and called his community and ours to such witness – that of the widening of our hearts. He knew that the saints’ path meant that many would deride him as an impostor, and even criminal, but he also insisted: *Widen your hearts*. He refused to stand idly by while the poor were ignored, despised, and disempowered, suggesting another path: *Widen your hearts!* He knew that the powers of the state might well be corrupt, and the local majority greedy and violent. But he kept a higher standard for the calling of the saints: *the widening of our hearts*.

There is really nothing else to do today, except to hear Paul’s word – echoing the ancient prophet Isaiah – for us:

At the acceptable time I have listened to you,  
and helped you on the day of salvation.  
*Behold! Now is the acceptable time!*  
*Behold! Now is the day of salvation!*

Today, the only question that matters is whether we are a people of this gospel. A people of this faith. A people of this hope. A people who know that God makes saints at the margins, in the byways, among the vulnerable who know that the widening of our hearts is the way of life.

Today, the only question that matters, the only decision that counts, is whether we are willing to give our lives to the gospel that calls us to follow Jesus in breaking with every tradition that gets in the way of healing; to oppose every law that obstructs justice for the disenfranchised and vulnerable; to open wide our mouths, and widen our hearts, to live into this “day of salvation” – not only for ourselves, but for the stranger who is among us, and the enemy we are called to love. Now. Here. Today.

It is hard and finally redemptive work, this widening of our hearts!

It is the opening of joy in our lives, the triumph of faith over fear.

And we can only imagine doing this because we worship the God who widens Her heart among us. Because our God calls us here to a feast at the places of our deepest hunger. Because our God reminds us that the word of promise is truer than the lure of success. Because our God encourages us to

see that She is still about the work of making saints among us, even us, even today! To become saints as those who believe and live the good news that sorrow may be among us in the night but joy dawns with the morning; that the poor and the enemy, the feared and the despised, are still among us holding the treasure of God's image; that love is stronger than death, and divine justice more tenacious than any human election.