

An “Opportunity” You Didn’t Want

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Luke 21:10-19; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-8, 10-13

Bill Moyers is someone I have long admired. An ordained Baptist minister, he worked as both a pastor and as a PR officer for a Southern Baptist seminary before joining the staff of the newly formed Peace Corps in the early 60s. From there, Moyers became press secretary for his fellow Texan, LBJ, and went on to a distinguished career as a television journalist. He produced some renowned documentaries, often on religious themes, such as *Genesis: A Living Conversation* and *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*.

Now 80, Moyers has lived through the Great Depression, WW II, the Cold War, the turbulent 60s, and 9/11. But only now, as he enters his waning years, has he become truly fearful for his country. In a recent interview, he confessed, “For the first time in my long life -- and I have been a part of politics and government for all these years — yes, for the first time (I fear for America) because a democracy can die of too many lies, and we’re getting close to that terminal moment unless we reverse the obsession with lies that are being fed around the country.”

I too am fearful for America. We find ourselves in a truly Orwellian moment when the expression “conservative values” no longer means what it once did: personal morality, small government, the separation of powers, and fiscal conservatism. No, today, the very religious and

political figures who couldn't impeach Bill Clinton fast enough for a deplorable, if private indiscretion, are defending a president whose twisting of the truth and over-reaching his presidential powers seemingly know no bounds. We find ourselves in an unsettling time when the principles of our democracy, that once made America a beacon for justice and truth in the world, are imperiled.

Meanwhile, wild fires consume beautiful stretches of California. Floods and famine wreak havoc around the globe. And another tragic school shooting brings death and devastation. In such a dangerous, violent, unpredictable world, it can seem, as Bill Moyers now fears, that the very fabric of life as we have known is being torn asunder.

And yet, says Jesus, when hard times come, don't despair. Wars, natural disasters, and political instability belong to the warp and woof of human life. Don't be shaken by this! For such trials and tribulations "give you an opportunity to testify" (Luke 21:13).

And yet, one wonders, to what might Jesus' followers testify in times like these, especially when his church is every bit as divided as the country at large.

Recently, I saw a news photo of two or three dozen preachers like myself crowded into the oval office, praying over the president. With these, my brothers--and I say, *brothers*, advisedly, because there was scarcely a sister in the room--I share a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and believe his good news as the hope of the world.

And yet, to a man, those other preachers believe the president is God's instrument for achieving their political ends. By contrast, I believe that *no* president, whether Barak Obama or Donald Trump, deserves the unabashed admiration or support of the church of Jesus Christ. And there was a time, not so long ago, when other conservatives believed that too.

On another front, our Moravian friends are entering into a very public spat over whether gay persons are welcome in the church. Some, claiming biblical authority, say "No," while others standing on the love and teachings of Jesus say, "Yes".

Knowing and loving gay persons, as I do, who are not only conscientious disciples of Jesus, but called and gifted for ministry, this one is a no-brainer to me. I don't believe the Lord who welcomed eunuchs to his movement (Mt. 19:11-12)--at a time when they were considered outside the sexual norm and were unwelcome in the Temple of Jerusalem--would ask gay believers to make do in the back of the church's bus. And yet, for holding that conviction, some Baptists, like some Moravians, would consider me an infidel.

So what does it mean to bear witness to Jesus in such a divided, conflicted time? If this distressing period in our national life is "an opportunity to testify," that begs the question, testify to *what?*

Perhaps we might start with a foundational, unflinching, non-negotiable conviction to seek and speak the truth. This is the most basic of Christian convictions, and a principle well-attested in both testaments of the Bible. "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor" is one of the Big 10. The book of Proverbs implores us, "Hear, for I will speak what is right; my mouth will utter truth. All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them" (Prov. 8:6-9). Or as Jesus nailed this ethical imperative in the life with God, "You shall know *the truth* and *the truth* shall set you free."

Some years ago, an African-American couple moved into an all-white neighborhood in New York State. They made friends with their neighbors and it appeared all was well. But then one morning the couple woke up to find racial slurs painted all over their house.

The police came and all the neighbors were interviewed, but no one could, or would, provide any leads. Then a 10-year-old boy rode up on his bicycle and asked to speak to the police. "I know who did it," he said. "I saw them this morning when I was delivering my papers." The police got a description and soon arrested two men.

Later, the African-American couple spoke with the boy. "Why did you tell?" they asked. "Isn't that risky?"

"Well," said the paperboy, matter-of-factly. "I'm a Christian. And Christians tell the truth."

It ought to be just that basic and instinctive: "Christians tell the truth." And Christians seek and demand the truth because truth is an essential bulwark, not just of our democracy, but of the rule and reign of God.

When it comes to the impeachment proceedings now unfolding in Washington, I don't have a direct line to heaven. As Paul confessed when dealing with a hot button issue at the church in Corinth, namely, whether young unmarried women, essentially nuns, should marry, "I have no command of the Lord (about this) but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (1 Cor. 7:25).

So too with impeachment. I have no word from the Lord about this. But speaking personally, I believe we can and should seek the truth. And once the truth is established, the senate should render its verdict. And if need be, in November of next year, the American people should render theirs.

But what should *not* happen in the church of Jesus Christ is that the followers of Jesus become easy prey for political hacks, whether of the right or the left. Instead, we should be partisans, not of any political party, but of the truth. We should be discerning and thoughtful, in the words of Jesus, we should be "wise as serpents and innocents as doves" (Mt. 10:16) rather than simply parrot the invective coming from our favorite talking head. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we answer to a higher Lord than *that*.

There is a second element of our Christian witness in trying times such as these, yet another foundational principle of Jesus we must not squander or compromise, namely, the call to love our neighbor and yes, our enemies too. This command is especially important regarding our *intimate* enemies, those family members, friends, and fellow church members with whom we don't see eye-to-eye about President Trump, or most anything else.

To love those with whom we passionately disagree does not mean to generate warm feelings on demand, as if that were even possible. Rather, to love one's enemy means to treat that person with respect and compassion, even when, *especially* when we are least inclined to do so. As Jesus unpacks the phrase, "Love your enemies," in the Sermon on the Mount, "If you love those who love you, that's no surprise. Even (rogues) do that. No, you are called to be like your Father in heaven who makes the sun rise on the good *and* the evil and sends rain to the righteous *and* the unrighteous"

Talk about an opportunity to testify! In this divided, contentious period in our nation's history, to be part of a family or friendship or church where people can disagree without attacking or vilifying the other party, bears witness to a new kind of reality. Namely, a love like God's own that treats every person as the child of God he or she is.

Last January, we had a Wednesday night program at our church where two young women ministers were interviewed: Emily Hull McGee from First Baptist here in Winston-Salem and Lin Story Buntz, the associate at College Park in Greensboro. Each told about how she learned to thrive as a woman in ministry, despite the obstacles and odds they faced.

Toward the end of the interview, someone asked Emily and Lin to name the greatest challenge facing them in our generation. I thought they might name some hot-button issue like income inequality or climate change. But as seasoned pastors, these women were savvy enough to know where the church's real challenge lies.

"The greatest challenge the church faces in this culture," said one "is to bear witness to a harmony, based not in sameness, but in respect and humility and love."

"We are called," said the other, "to enlarge our tent" (Isaiah 54:2) as the prophet Isaiah declared, "moving the stakes ever outward to make room for others *not* like ourselves."

One of the things that makes Knollwood so special, at least to me, is that here, passionate convictions and respectful disagreement can still coexist. Which is all too rare in cyberspace and

cable news; where most people live in an internet bell jar populated only by other ideologues like themselves.

Yes, hard times will come, warns Jesus. But be not dismayed! This will give you an opportunity to testify. And when Knollwood bears witness to the truth, on the one hand, and a love and welcome bigger than our differences, on the other, she rises to her calling as a beachhead of the coming kingdom of God.

“So brothers and sister,” the Apostle implores us, “do not grow weary in doing what is right” (2 Thess. 2:13). Instead, quietly make your living and faithfully bear your witness.” Which being translated to our context means: there is no more important time for Knollwood to keep being Knollwood than right here and right now.

After a recent KBC arts class for children, a 6-year-old girl was washing her hands at a sink next to a Knollwood member. Clearly impressed by her arts and hearts experience, the little girl looked up and asked, “Who owns this church?”

The woman replied, “This is God’s church.”

Not impressed by the Sunday School answer, the child shook her head and said, “That’s not what I mean. Who *owns* this church?”

As her tutor wracked her brain for a better answer, the little girl started waving and pointing at the interior expanse of the Wellness and Community Center. “Is this the oldest building?” she asked.

“No, this is the newest building,” her mentor answered and then took her outside to show her the Noffsinger youth building. Pointing, the woman said, “*That’s* the oldest building.”

The little girl’s eyes grew wide as she took in the beautiful campus as though for the first time. “There are a lot of buildings,” she said, awestruck, before returning to finish her art project.

Her handler just stood there, savoring the moment. Later, she wrote, "I was left to ponder the gratitude I feel for all of Knollwood's buildings and the people who use them. We truly are blessed."

Yes, we are truly blessed. Because we have resources and opportunity to bear witness to the new community Jesus makes possible: a family of faith where his truth can set you free and loving your neighbor, and yes, your enemies too, is not just a sentimental cliché but a sacred duty.

That's why as you leave today, you'll be offered a grocery bag to fill with food and bring back next Sunday for the hungry in our community.

And next Sunday night, we'll host our Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic friends in a community service of thanksgiving.

And when you go to work or school this week--or wherever you spend your days--remember: you go first, not as a republican or a democrat, but as a partisan of Jesus. Your absolute loyalty belongs *only* to him.

"So quit complaining about hard times!" Jesus chides us. "This is your opportunity . . . to *testify!*"

O holy Christ, for the opportunity to live your truth and embody your love in challenging times, we are thankful. Now give us the vision and strength we need to bear faithful witness to you. In your name, we ask this, of our loving heavenly Abba, Amen.