

From the Community Pulpit
**“Living Beyond Fear:
An Open Letter to the Candidates”**

Sermon by Robert Lee Hill
September 26, 2004

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TEXTS:

II Chronicles 7:14 —... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Ezekiel 28:16-17 – 16 In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and the guardian cherub drove you out from the midst of the stones of fire. 17 Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor....

Dear Candidates:

A mere six weeks from this coming Tuesday, we, the people of the United States of America will, once more, with vigor and purpose, exercise our rights and responsibilities as citizens, as we select a host of newly elected and re-elected officials as leaders of our nation, our states, our counties, and our municipalities. Premier among our selections will be the person we choose to occupy the Oval Office in the White House for the next four years. Customarily, a message such as this would be tendered to the *newly* elected President, some time after the election and before the day of inauguration on January 20th of 2005. Yet, the tenor of the times and the concerns which burden so many have inspired me to offer this communication today. To wait until the turning of the new year would seem to be, at best, an evasion, and, at worst, cowardice. We face too many momentous issues during a time of war and in the midst of war-like politics to remain silent.

So, greetings from Community Christian Church, and, as we say in our tradition, “*Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.*”¹ After the example of Paul, we Christians are urged to offer “*supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings ... for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions [such as presidential candidates], so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.*”² But, let us note quickly, in these days of uproar, it is difficult to lead a “quiet” life; in this time of war and rumors of

war, it is hard to lead a “peaceable life”; in this season of contentious division, it is nigh unto impossible to know how to share “godliness” and “dignity” in any lasting way.

As your respective campaigns proceed forward to the first of the debates this coming Thursday, it is good for you to know at least four realities about those of us here in this congregation in “the heart of the heart” of America.

X ***The kingdom of God will not rise or fall on Nov. 2.*** The kingdom of God – the in-breaking realm of God’s justice and mercy and peace – does not depend on this or any other election. It should behoove religious people and political operatives of all kinds to quiet their rhetoric in this regard. The apocalyptic tones and the scare strategies in some speeches – regarding the choice of one candidate over another – serve only to horrify and humiliate. They do not ennoble or enlighten. To suggest that the choice of one candidate over another will weaken our nation and make us more vulnerable to future terrorist attacks is a reckless and despicable statement. We as a nation can and must do better than such rhetoric.

X ***There is no such person as “God’s candidate.”*** It is certainly not illegal (and is, in fact, commendable) to appeal to religious folks to vote their consciences (as citizens of obvious and perceived moral convictions). But to equate any sort of righteousness with a certain way of voting is a desecration of the spirited diversity that infuses most congregations, especially ours, and a dishonoring of the time-honored separation of church and state. On November 2nd, Christians – along with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and all other religious people, for that matter – will be casting votes for a variety of candidates, aligned with a variety of political parties. While we may adjudge that certain candidates align more harmoniously with our values than others do, there is no one person – man or woman or child – who is “God’s candidate.” Anyone who suggests such a notion joins forces with the vestiges of a malevolent past and the hurtful wounds over which a World War was waged.

X And, likewise, ***human opinions are human opinions.*** We would not say, during this or any other political season, that any of our individual, human opinions are truly ordained

of God. Our convictions emanate from our faithful and fallible lives, not from some ineffable inerrancy under our inviolable control. We each have been given brains and hearts and souls by which to discern, as best we can, the most appropriate policies and candidates. But ours are preferences, not prophecies of pre-ordained realities. It is good, in this regard, to recall Abraham Lincoln’s sentiments 140 years ago. At a White House dinner, so the story goes, a pious, churchly gentleman offered a benediction, closing with the affirmation: “*The Lord is on our side.*” When President Lincoln did not respond to this sentiment, someone asked him, “*Mr. President, don’t you believe that the Lord is always on the side of the right?*” To which Lincoln retorted, “*Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side. My great concern is to be on God’s side.*”³

X ***Grace, not works, always marks our territory.*** As we seek to be more and more on God’s side, we need to declare that ***ours is truly not an ownership society.*** Yes, we know that one of the greatest accomplishments in many an American life is to own a home. And, yes, young adults take exceeding pride in that “first car” they truly possess. But who owns the daylight that shines on every face? Who owns the gravity that keeps every foot planted on the ground? Who owns the will to freedom and the expression of daily grace in human life? Who truly owns the inspiration that sets us racing pell mell down hallways of justice and corridors of joy? Who owns the virtues by which we strive to live better and better lives each and every morning? Who owns the impulse to worship and to pray and to live a truly impressive ideal: “*kindness in the absence of gain*”?⁴ Who truly owns what finally matters? Can we, dare we, ever forget the wise counsel of the Psalter?— “*The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein....*”⁵

Now to the situation in which we middle-of-the-country Americans find ourselves. It is like unto the situation that Tyre and its princely ruler faced when Ezekiel prophesied a challenging word six centuries before Christ’s birth. After a long series of oracles and lamentations – pertaining first to the siege of Jerusalem (chapter 24), and then to the offending

Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and Phillistines (chapter 25), and then to the entire jingoistic, prideful lot of Tyre’s population (chapter 26 and 27) – the prophetic word finally bursts forth from Ezekiel about the self-deifying King of Tyre himself and his self-adoring kingdom. It is both an address and a lament about destructive actions and attitudes, summed up with this damaging description: ***Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor...***” Of course, and thankfully, we no longer must abide a theocratic monarchy. But the parallels between Ezekiel’s time and ours are eerily parallel. Has our American heart become too “proud” because of our “beauty”? Have we corrupted our “wisdom” for the sake of our “splendor”? Can we ever imagine coming close to failing and falling away from the true purposes of freedom and freedom’s ways?

Beyond Ezekiel’s insight into the corruptibility of power, we recognize that we all face a base-level of “free-floating fear” these days. I am deeply grateful for my friend Forrest Church’s keen insights in his new book ***Freedom from Fear*** about the five principal fears that burden us these days.⁶

We are ***frightened*** by the specters of increasing violence at 27th and Prospect in Kansas City, Missouri, *and* just around the corner in *way* too many of our neighborhoods all across our metropolis and the nation.

We ***worry*** about things we cannot change and are over-wrought, over-worked, and over-concerned about the things we can.

We experience ***guilt*** in the face of that which we could have made better or right and didn’t.

We are ***insecure*** when we wonder if we can ever do or be *enough* to measure up to someone else’s standards.

And we are made far too weak by dreary ***dread*** about the basic limits of life – like the fact that we can only be in one place at any one time, or the fact that we have but only one

earthly life and that it does not go on forever.

But there is more. We are haunted by the daily theme of fear itself. We have forgotten what President Franklin Delano Roosevelt proclaimed in 1933 and what President Ronald Reagan cherished a generation later as a constant watchword for the American people: “*The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.*” In the place of such a confidence, the fears that have nagged our nation and haunted our world since the tragic events of 9/11 continue to plague us. And any President who would lead us effectively will always, necessarily work toward the quickening within us of a recollection of “the better angels of our nature,” to use President Lincoln’s phrase, to dispel such fear.

As for solutions in our situations, what are we to say? And what will you say? And, more importantly for us people of faith, what does God’s gospel of love, mercy, justice, and peace say about our prospects?

There are sure guidelines for followers in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which may help to instruct us as a nation. There is a great assurance granted to Solomon upon the completion of the Temple at Jerusalem: “.... ***if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.***” President Bush and Senator Kerry, we pray that you will commit yourself to our highest ideals and the practical wisdom passed on to Solomon....

X ***The call to simple humility*** is clear – for both of you and for us all. A sense of humility—a humility that one can see in another’s eyes and detect in another’s manner and observe in another’s leadership – shall always be in order.

X ***Prayer and worship*** are always in order for people of faith, and we pledge to do our part. When we do more of both – fully mindful of current events and how God’s gospel of love applies to them – whole communities, whole states, whole nations, and indeed, a whole world

will benefit.

X ***Turning from our wicked ways***, now that's a different story. Such a turning will be difficult indeed, since many of us are so prone to avoid any description of anything we ever do as "wicked." And well we should, since the world is too overly full with Calvinistic self-loathing and enmity. But an honest assessment of our failures, individually and corporately, and a heartfelt spirit of repentance are always in order when a great nation wants to become even greater.

Our times now are not unlike a difficult time in the past, when, in the torpor and torment of the roiling 60's, the great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sent an urgent telegram to the Oval office, urging then President Kennedy to recognize and act with courage in an hour that called for "*high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity.*"⁷ Such an hour has arrived once again.

How tragic are the potential consequences when we fail to act with moral courage. Such a moment occurred two weeks ago, on a quiet Monday morning, with seemingly nothing going on legislatively in our nation. But shame on us and on our national leaders, all across the board, on both sides of the aisle! I grew up in a hunting culture. I shot a shotgun when I was eight years old. I have many friends who enjoy hunting. To me three of the most wondrous smells in the whole world are: (1) the smell of my wife Priscilla's hair; (2) the aroma of coffee brewing in our kitchen; and (3) the scent that emanates from a spent shotgun shell. I treasure the friendships I have with respected folks who are life-long members of the NRA. But how on God's good green earth is it justifiable to put our police officers, highway patrol officers, FBI, CIA, and Security forces – not to mention common citizens, especially our children – at ever greater risk, by allowing the ban on assault weapons to expire? How pathetic that there was nary a whimper of protest from any of our leaders. Shame on the members of the House and the Senate – on both sides of the aisle – for caving in to the perceived threat of a powerful lobby. And shame on us for electing such examples of cowardice.

As for the situation in Iraq, it should be admitted that whoever wins the election come November 2nd will enjoy one of the most daunting challenges to be faced by a President and a Congress – “Winning the Peace.” From all reports, from our own Department of Defense and from the United Nations, from anecdotal accounts by soldiers whom we continue to support strongly with our prayers and our earnest hopes, from assessments by trustworthy journalists and wizened military strategists, the prospects for a “best case scenario” in Iraq have now nearly vanished. It is clearer every day that we are learning all over again a lesson which has been taught throughout our journey as the greatest democratic republic in the history of the world: ***democracy develops best as a percolating reality from the bottom up and from the center of a people’s culture; it falters, sometimes tragically, if imposed from above and/or without.***

As I send this message your way, I am mindful of a list of service men and women posted at the entry way to our church building. We have prayed for these individuals, and indeed all the service folks in Iraq and Afghanistan and other places where they have placed their lives in harm’s way for the cause of the United States. To us, these are not abstractions in some statistician’s count, nor are they only a roll call of the valorous, as valorous as they are. They are members of Community’s family of faith and the sons and daughters and husbands and wives and uncles and aunts and nephews and nieces of members and friends of our congregation who requested prayers for them. I would like you both to know their names: *Spec. Johnson Kincaid, Capt. Heather Shuey, Lance Corporal Trent Shuey, Corp. Jonathon Bent, Joshua Schafer, Guy Michael Radcliff, Sgt. Kyle Thorne, Commander Tony Mitchell, Priv. 1st Class Brian Ensor, Justin Klaus (MP Army), 1st Lt. Matt Rupnick, SFC Mickey Hartsook, Cory, Staff Sgt. Jaudon White, Major Richard Klein, Jason Bernard, Keith Taylor, Paul Haddock, Rebecca Weaver, Shawn Skaggs, Adam Roberts.*

Mr. Bush and Mr. Kerry, whoever prevails come November 2nd, make fast your plans and make sure your resolve to bring them home. Bring them home. Out of the pain of 9/11, a line of connection between the Afghanistan endeavors and the containment of terror was assumed and

shown. Then there was the presumption that the “Iraqi Freedom” cause would be and do likewise. But less and less, we must admit, do we see the connection between what has ensued in Iraq and the prospects for defanging the serpentine capacities of any terror network. Out of the pain of 9/11 and out of the wisdom gained since Baghdad was overtaken and Saddam Hussein was captured, may we be empowered to heal with a return of our soldiers to friendly shores and our embracing arms. Yes, we know that the *sine qua non* of political life is purposeful strength, but equally important is the *sine qua non* of religious life which is compassionate love.⁸ May you each have large portions of both.

Please recognize, President Bush and Senator Kerry, that for far too many of our brothers and sisters in the United States, this is now a despairing and despicable moment.

Instead of growing toward what Josiah Royce called “*the beloved community*,” we have become bedeviled isolates.

Instead of building what Martin Luther King called the “*new world house*,” we have grown satisfied with the old, dilapidated apartments of our petty prejudices.

Instead of abiding in the *strength to love* which is given by God, we have become addicted to the love of strength which is given by the world.

The protection we need is for all, because, as President Kennedy proclaimed in his inaugural address, “*If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.*”

May our hopes and dreams for our common future not become so much refuse, like the red, white and blue placards that will litter the medians of our cities and the front yards of our neighborhoods across the country on November 3rd, the day after the election, merely yesterday’s imperatives and overdone slogans defunct of any consequence.

When the election is over, no matter for whom we have cast our votes, one of you will be *our* President. And as bitter as the political battle has been, and regardless of how wounded our

hearts (and our egos) may be, we pledge to unite our hearts and minds as people of one nation.

Speaking of our one nation, let me signal one final truth for both of you to consider. While you each seek the Presidency, it is not the highest office in the land. The highest office-holders in the land are those singular, distinguished, and blessed individuals who each, like both of you, bear the title “citizen.” As occupants of the highest office which can be obtained in a democracy, we citizens here pledge to work together, to live together, to struggle together – while not in total agreement then still at least with a shared fidelity devoted to the common good – for the betterment of the United States. As Christians, along with other people of faith, we pledge to work together, to live together, to struggle together, for the increase of life and liberty in a world sorely in need of both, as well as freedoms’ goodness and God’s grace. May it be so. AMEN.

Sincerely Yours – just as surely as each of you and we all are sincerely God’s –

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cc: Emanuel Cleaver, Candidate for U.S. Representative, Missouri’s Fifth Congressional District
 Jeanne Patterson, Candidate for U.S. Representative, Missouri’s Fifth Congressional District
 Senator Christopher Bond, Candidate for U.S. Senate
 Missouri State Treasurer Nancy Farmer, Candidate for U.S. Senate

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- **It was mailed to President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry on Tuesday, September 28, 2004**

NOTES

¹ I Tim. 1:2

² I Tim. 2:1-2

³ http://www.indianchild.com/abraham_lincoln.htm

⁴ a phrase I first heard from BettyLu Donaldson as the ideal action which most impresses her

⁵ Psalm 24:1

⁶ Forrest Church, *Freedom from Fear: Finding the Courage to Act, Love, and Be* (New York: St Martin's, 2004)

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*: Essays Edited by Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996)

⁸ after a line of William Sloane Coffin's, "*the sine qua non of religion is compassion*"