



THE LOVE OF LIBERTY

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 10TH

PREACHED BY REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER

Love will not die here today, friends. No it won't. They can try to extinguish our flame and silence us or tell us the world is a hateful place, but love will not die here today. What I'm saying to you is they might try to take our friends and family to jail or tell us that there's one right religion in America, but love will not die here today. At the core of our faith, at the core of this place, at the core of this community is the notion that love will not die here today, tomorrow, or any day in the future because we know how to live against the grain, don't we? Love will not die here today. I will not let it.

Friends, we have been through a week, haven't we? Or a month or a year. Some people here have been it in it, through it, and done with it their whole lives, but this week was special, wasn't it? Over the last months, I've spent a lot of time thinking, what in the world am I going to say on this day from this pulpit? I've sat in my office alone quietly listening to my thoughts. I've spoken to my colleagues I respect around the country. I've imagined with my staff and my team just what you might need today. I wrote three sermons for three scenarios for this Sunday, and this morning, I chose none of them.

I chose none of them because they didn't adequately describe the stages of grief and hope and shame and failure and challenge I've been through since Tuesday. I hoped our progressive values would finally be affirmed in our country. I hope that somehow our progressive values would rise above the tide with care and concern for the most vulnerable and historically oppressed and marginalized. I had this vision where the petty and the racist and the liars all skulked away into the shadows, and I watched a week ago the cold open at Saturday Night Live with tears of potential joy.

We weren't crazy to hope. My friend and colleague said to me this week, "We weren't crazy. She's beautiful and capable. It was reasonable, a reasonable vision to have people meet across differences.

We weren't crazy. That wasn't a crazy dream." And then I watched, like you did, with some despair that this was not going to be true. Then all I felt was shame. How could I have been so dumb to think that all the joy and potential for these progressive things could come to pass? How could I have thought that a woman of color could beat out racism and misogyny in America today?

How could I believe that arguments about the price of milk were more important than what was behind all this? Shame on me, I felt. Shame on me. And then came the rage. The rage turned into violent thoughts about my neighbor's political signs, the rage about what's holding women back, about the vindictive celebrations that I can see. And then I started stress eating carbs. Anybody? And then I started listening to Tom Petty, I Wouldn't Back Down. And then Curtis, Mayfield, Keep On, Keepin' On, and then Rosanna's song, No Love Dying. And then more eating and seeking friends and posting frustrations on social media, and then the fog of grief that has enveloped me and the worry for my trans child and my gay sister and all of you, and not knowing if I can minister to anyone today.

Congregant: We're here.

I see you. And then I came to the stage. I made up all these stages, but I came to the stage I want to call, bring on the apocalypse. That thing where you go, well, screw it. They could have the world. Let them screw it up. And then let's see. Right? Don't come calling. And then knowing that this isn't who I am and that's not what I believe. So came the analysis stage. What are we up against? Who's saying smart things about why and how to go forward? And I admit I'm still a little bit in this stage, and I'm worried. Even through all of this, coming here this morning, I want to say to you, seeing you here, and I do see you, seeing my staff and my colleagues and what we are. I know love will not die here today.

That is why right now, I'm going to invoke the age old value we hold dear in this tradition, which is called the freedom of the pulpit, meaning if you don't like what I say, you're welcome to debate with me on Monday because you have the freedom of the pew to think what you want. Freedom is a value here. You have the freedom to think what you want, but today, I have the freedom to say what's on my heart. And I need to say that no matter your party or who you voted for, what you think of him, we elected a man who's a convicted felon, is followed by a trail of abuse of women, has employed and led with race baiting statements and actions, has assured us he will deport millions of undocumented people, make our family members and friends illegal, and do everything in his power to upend democracy and elections and rule as a dictator.

His friend, Victor Orbán, the Hungarian tyrant who has successfully eliminated democracy in his country and champions what he calls illiberal democracy, a form of government which holds nominal elections, promises a return to white dominated religiously based society and has pushed his vision by eliminating the independent press, cracking down on political opposition, getting rid of the rule of law, and dominating the economy with oligarchs, posted on social media this week, Victor Orbán posted after a conversation with Trump, "We have big plans for the future." Behind the Trump campaign in his transition team are literally white nationalists, like Nick Fuentes, who posted Wednesday, "Your body, my choice forever." And he gloated that men will now legally control women's bodies. His post, within an hour, had 22,000 likes. Behind the Trump curtain is right-wing

influencer, Benny Johnson, who's been funded by Russia and who posted this week, "It is my honor to inform you that Project 2025 was real the whole time." This week, trump's campaign secretary, Karoline Leavitt, said Trump would launch the largest mass deportation operation of undocumented immigrants in history, and the stock in private prison companies jumped 41%.

A plan to overturn every progressive value that we stand for is coming with a mandate and possibly both houses of the legislative branch, so I call this stage where I am alarm and alert. Alarm means this is not a drill. Alert means we have to think about what work we have to do, and we have to start making plans. I said to the strategic planning team this week in the church, it's possible that we should pivot where we're going to be talking about being a sanctuary or underground force for immigrants. Maybe we should pivot to address what might be coming because I believe, even when freedom dies a little, it will not die here. When love is pushed aside in favor of hate, love will not die here. I went back and I read my sermon from this day in 2016, some of you were here, in which I said we will not stop fighting, whatever comes. And you know what? We didn't. In so many tangible ways, we have helped people, especially women with their lives and their choices, especially youth learning about their bodies.

We started a widespread work of resistance and racial equity. We put efforts into supporting our trans families and addressing things our state was doing to confront our values. So we know how to fight, and the only thing that is different this time is I'm exhausted. And I know that to say again, we must double down, is like telling a boxer who's rolling around on the mat, he's got to get back up. It's harder to get off that mat to face an even bigger opponent. But you know what? That's we're going to do. Part of alarm and alert is not being naive about our enemies. We have enemies in this state and country who want us gone, want us jailed, want us hurt, and we will not take this lightly. We will not stop speaking the truth or pointing to the truth, or putting a spotlight on the abuse of the vulnerable. We do not stop even when we are in danger because love does not die here today, friends. And freedom will not die here either. You get what I'm saying?

I know that none of this gets done this week or month. It takes time to get off that mat, to re-energize the spirit, and to remember that as people of faith, we are called to do these things, to speak the truth, to see the vulnerable, to act for others. It takes time to find the strength and a longer view of our mission and reclaim our patriotism for the good of this country and for each other. It takes slowing down and getting deliberate and doubling down on what we care about. In 1952, after being called names for being an intellectual and accused of being soft on communism, Adlai Stevenson reminded America what real patriotism is. He said, "What do we mean by patriotism in the context of our time?" I ventured to suggest he said that what we mean is a sense of national responsibility, a patriotism which is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.

That dedication for us is to not give up or give in, or let freedom die or let love die, neither our love for each other or ourselves, or dare I say it, our enemies because part of our religion is that no matter what happens, we commit to seeing humanity in even the most obscured human beings, and we work for the dignity and worth of all, ours and theirs. And the truth of the matter is that we are entering into an extended period of history where the rights and well-being of people of color, the poor, women,

non-Christians, gay and lesbian and trans people will be undermined and degraded. This isn't going to be something we can ignore or hide from in here. And as exhausted and as exhausting as that sounds, maybe this is our calling, plain and simple.

Maybe we've been working all these years to strengthen the church, to grow its budgets, to empower our children and youth, to extend our reach beyond this sanctuary into the country for this moment. Maybe this is the moment we've been working for all this time, in the committee meetings, and in the worship planning, and the strategic initiatives, and the small group meetings, and the service, and the volunteering, and today's invitation to double your pledge. Sorry, I can't help myself. But I do mean it. Invest here. This is the most important thing you can invest in right now. I said this last service, and somebody came up to me and said, "I want to whisper something into your ear. I'm going to give \$11,111 matching gift to anybody who wants to raise their pledge." You want to raise your pledge, you just write it down and hand me a note, and we'll be in touch with. If you haven't pledged yet, you have a chance.

Everything we do and all that we have been for 125 years has been preparation for what comes now, to be a faith that when freedom was displaced, a faith practiced the religion of love in forests in Poland and Transylvania when they weren't allowed to have churches, to be a faith that when to say that Jesus was, man, you got burned at the stake or to use reason in religion was heresy means that we will prevail all this, that freedom has been at the heart of our faith for 600 years and love is its blood. This will not be a place, say it with me, where love dies today. There is too much at stake, friends. I know you're having trouble getting to action. I know today is for feelings, but I can't sit around. You know me.

I heard my colleague, Reverend Wolf, [inaudible 00:17:19] Wolf in Tulsa once preach a midrash, a biblical story that the rabbis used to tell that I've told a few times here, but it's about Moses on the shores of the Red Sea. He stood there wondering how he could lead the children across the Red Sea. Would they be all right? Would they drown? Would they get where God asked him to take them? He pondered and hesitated and questioned God's instructions. He himself had that old, familiar fleeting thought. Maybe slavery was better than freedom. Maybe I should have stayed in bed today. Maybe I don't have to be a courageous person because someone else is going to be courageous. Not sure what to do, as people all waited there. And at the moment when he was ready to do something, he took a breath and he raised his arms and he was heard to say, "First I will do, and then I will believe."

Haven't we all been there? The time to do is upon us. No matter what hesitation we have about the future of our country, first, we will do, and then we will believe we will do the right thing for the person sitting next to you in the pew. We will do the right thing by helping the lost and the illegal or the one who is attacked. We will do the right thing for those who suddenly or all of their lives have felt betrayed by America, and we will become the America we want to be, even in small acts of kindness today, in preparation for bigger acts of collected power later. It is written that when Moses put his staff in the sea expecting the sea to part, that nothing happened, the rabbi said. The sea did not divide. Not until the oldest woman jumped in did the promised miracle happen and the sea parted.

You know what that means? That means don't look for me. The unlikely hero and shero is you. We're going to need you, we're going to need each other, and we're going to jump in. What we know is true today, friends. What we know is true is that no matter who runs our country, we still have racism, we still have patriarchy, we still have classism, we still have disparities and inequalities and poverty, and we are called to step into it, even when we do not believe. To do first, then believe is what we are called to be because what guides us and what holds us, and what steers us and what lifts us off the mat of despair is a love that will not die today.

In 1858, in the middle of a heated lead-up to the Civil War, back in the day when politicians had power that was built on integrity, not media coverage, Abraham Lincoln, who was running for Senate, spoke in Edwardsville, Illinois, and he said this. He said, "What constitutes the bulwark of our liberty and independence? It is not our frowning battlements, our bristling seacoast, the guns of our war steamers, or the strength of our gallant and disciplined army. These are not our reliance against a resumption of tyranny in our fair land."

"All of them may be turned against our liberties," he said. "Our reliance is in the love of liberty, which God has planted in our bosoms. Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit, which prizes liberty as the heritage of all in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors."

So what's Lincoln telling us from 1858? He's telling us we don't give up. We don't stop loving liberty. We don't stop loving this country, even when we don't believe. We can, as the poet said today, we can make this place beautiful with acts of resistance, I add. We can find each other. We can construct peace. We can make love. We can reconcile waking with sleeping, and reconcile ourselves with each other and ourselves with ourselves. We can ensure that we have a future if we do not give up. And if I can do it, friends, you can do it. And we can do it because, friends, love will not die here today. I love you all. Amen.