

# *Confidence and Humility in a “Purple Church”*

By Kimberly L. Clayton



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**F**or the last six years I have served as an Interim/Transitional Senior Pastor in three “purple congregations.” The theological and political viewpoints among members are spread across a continuum from staunchly conservative to wildly progressive, with the vast majority clustered on both sides of the middle. A few members have been hyper-attuned (I might even say “hyper-sensitive”) to anything from the pulpit that could be construed as “political.” Back in June, the lectionary offered Genesis 3:8-15—where Adam blames Eve for the whole eating-forbidden-fruit-thing. During the sermon, I offered a bi-partisan aside, meant to be humorous, noting that Senator Menendez and Justice Alito (who had recently blamed their wives for hidden gold bars and an upside down flag, respectively) stood in a long line from Adam down through the generations to our time. I learned later that someone in the sanctuary got angry and walked out because I was being “too political.” Include humor among the list of casualties in these polarized times. To stand in the pulpit and preach these days can be an exercise in fending off incoming missiles and emailed missives from every direction.

Until mid-July in this presidential election season, voters on both sides seemed a mix of apathetic and angry/on edge. A failed assassination attempt against the Republican nominee followed by a change at the top of the Democratic ticket caused a stir, but from my perspective the mood of voters remains one of divisive anxiety. To borrow an image visible here in Fredericksburg’s Civil War battlefields, trenches are “dug in,” the battlelines set. While I have clergy friends whose congregations are mostly like-minded theologically and politically, the congregations I have served are not. Call me crazy, but I like the mix of red and blue, of conservative and progressive. It is challenging and sometimes frustrating for sure, but the theological and political diversity within these congregations has made me a better pastor and preacher. I have to read widely and think critically, carefully about what I say in sermons and

in prayers and in hallway conversations. I cannot assume that the way I see things is how others also see things. We watch different news channels, read different newspapers and opinion writers, and float in different social media bubbles. On Sundays, we gather together to worship God, pray for the world, and find guidance for living our shared Christian faith in our daily lives and in our communal witness. We read from the same Bible, but not everyone hears and interprets it in the same way. I am granted the privilege of proclaiming the Word of God in the sanctuary. I do not ever want to “hide behind the text” in order to avoid being thrown over a cliff. At the same time, I hope each sermon is a faithful, wide invitation to a diverse crowd to walk together as the scriptures guide our steps toward a vision of something far greater and more important than our individual spheres of knowledge and influence, or the latest breaking news or source of immediate outrage.

In these days, I am particularly grateful for two foundational convictions or principles within my Presbyterian and Reformed heritage that help me keep my footing. These foundational principles inform me as I write and deliver sermons, moderate Session (governing board) meetings, and work through difficult conversations with members or within a committee. I have even started speaking about them directly to members who are unaware of these rock bed underpinnings for our life together in the church.

The first foundational principle is our unwavering confidence in the sovereignty of God. In my dog-eared copy of John H. Leith’s 1977 book, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, the author places the sovereignty of God as the first and foremost conviction that informs all other convictions for Reformed people. Leith writes: The *living* God (emphasis the author’s) with whom we have to do “is the Creator of heaven and earth who maintains all things in their being and who governs them by [God’s] will. God is energy, force, and life. [God] is purpose, intention, and will.” Leith then quotes the prophet Isaiah to drive home this point: “[God] is the Lord God who ‘comes with might,’ ‘who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span,’ and before whom ‘the nations are as nothing’ and ‘are accounted by him as less than nothing’ (Isaiah 40:10, 12, 17). This is the Creator God who works mightily in human history to accomplish his purposes. [Our chief] end is to glorify God.”<sup>1</sup>

We are living in a time of endless, yet fleeting, cycles of outrage. The immediate and the urgent become the ultimate—capturing our attention, expending our energy until the next ‘immediate’ and ‘urgent’ thing comes along. Yet, our theology fixes our attention, calls for our best energies to focus on something, on some One, who is Ultimate, steadfast, the first and the last. We are called to engage our lives and our life together fully, including life in the political arena, in ways that glorify God, the *living* God who purposefully and mightily is at work in history to accomplish

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1. John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977) 67-68.

God's good purposes. I note particularly Leith's quote from Isaiah that the nations are "as nothing" when measured against the force of what God is up to and about. This should produce in all of us a healthy dose of humility about the "rightness" of our "side" or political stance; about the "righteousness" of any politician or political party whom we support. We are called to set our loyalty higher, acting and speaking in ways that glorify God; seeking to participate in God's good purposes to which the scriptures point through commandments and laws, in the words of the prophets, through stories, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Such a call requires rigorous study, critical thinking, mutual discernment, and collective imagination. Try as we might to discern God's good purposes in and for the world; try as we should to participate faithfully in what God is doing, we so often get it wrong. Even at our best, we misunderstand, misread, and fall short. To raise our eyes higher than the chaos of this present moment is essential. To see our own penchant for mistakes or making things worse is essential. God's ways are not our ways, nor are God's thoughts our thoughts, to quote another chapter from Isaiah (55:8). We always stand in need of correction and reorientation, so we always stand in need of each other, too. None of us has a corner on the truth. We may become wiser together than we might otherwise be on our own.

This does not mean, however, that every perspective, each person's "truth" is to be given equal value and weight. Plumb lines must be marked by the weight of scripture and history, giving us true lines and accurate depths by which our mission and ministry is set. The congregation I have served most recently is a certified Earth Care congregation. For the last two years, among other earth care efforts, we have dedicated a month in worship to themes of creation care using one of the "creation" lectionary cycles. Most members of the church believe that climate change is an urgent responsibility for people of faith to combat through individual and collective advocacy and practices. A few members consider it a hoax. One member regularly attends lectures and gatherings that include scientists who deny that climate change is a cause of concern. This member shares his views in conversations and in some groups. Last year, he wanted to offer an Adult Study taught from this perspective. We declined to endorse or host such a class.

Here, the second conviction or principle in my faith tradition has helped me navigate choppy political and theological waters. A paired set of convictions in the "Foundations of Presbyterian Polity" of our *Book of Order* are titled: *Truth and Goodness* and *Mutual Forbearance*. This pair of core principles teaches that truth is in order to goodness—that is, truth leads to goodness; truth promotes holiness as Jesus demonstrates holiness. Any opinion that makes falsehood equal to truth is both "pernicious" and "absurd." This principle declares an "inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it" (*F-3.0104*). This emphasis on truth is accompanied by another, *Mutual Forbearance*. While we cannot compromise on truth,

mutual forbearance is essential—the recognition that people of good character and principles may differ on issues, so it is also the duty “both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (*F-3.0105*). We do not have to demonize or devalue the person with whom we disagree. When the aforementioned member invited me to go to lunch to discuss his views on climate change, I declined. I told him I would be glad to go to lunch to get to know him better through the sharing of our faith journeys, but that I do not believe as he does in regard to climate change and had no interest in debating what I found to be untrue. Though the invitation to lunch dropped at that, he and I stayed in relationship outside of that topic and on Sundays exchanged sincere greetings as he stood faithfully at his volunteer post, assisting those who needed to enter the church by way of the elevator.

From the pulpit, I have preached about gun violence in the wake of a mass shooting; about the biblical commandment to care for the immigrant and the alien in our midst when children were being separated from their parents at the border. From the table, I have prayed for an end to the suffering of the Palestinian people due to indiscriminate bombings and blockaded food supplies leading to starvation, and for Donald Trump following the assassination attempt on his life. But week in and week out, the focus of my sermons and prayers has not been dominated by the passing headlines. Instead, the focus is on the commanding sovereignty of God who reigns above all earthly, passing powers and calls us to the responsibility of speaking and acting in ways that glorify God and promote truth, goodness, and holiness. I find myself emphasizing our shared baptism into Christ, by which we are made members of one another. Each Sunday together situates us within the comprehensive vision of God’s realm that constitutes our very existence and defines our purpose. In humility, we are asked to do everything we can to participate in and work toward God’s justice and reconciliation as we care for our neighbors, especially the most vulnerable, and bear with one another in the church.

In the first years of the church’s existence, their radical communal life and table fellowship took place in the midst of the entrenched stratifications and divisions of the Roman Empire. Their witness and way of life was distinctive and impactful. Today, followers of Jesus have an opportunity to embody this alternative and compelling witness in our time of battlelines drawn. These past two years in Virginia, I’ve been surrounded by vast, preserved empty fields where battles took place in a city that is home to two enclosed cemeteries containing hundreds of neat rows of identical small white headstones. These stretches of emptiness and burial plots are monuments to a nation divided against itself and the resulting death. Yet, since 1808, this congregation has chosen to be an alternate community to all that division, destruction, and death. Year after year, week after week, they gather around scripture and song, lifting prayers, passing of the peace of Christ, then go out to serve God’s great vision and call. Every now and then, someone will walk out in anger over something they find “too political,” but the door is never locked against them. If we

ever think we are no longer members of one another because of our differences, we will become another enclosed monument to death. My last Sunday at the church, we waved “alleluia streamers” and sang “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.” It was a way of declaring, after two years of hard work together and some divisions that were never resolved, our trust in the sovereignty of God and our commitment to mutual forbearance while seeking the truth that is in order to goodness. This time of polarized divisions requires a sense of humility about ourselves and great confidence in God who, for some reason long ago and still today, forms the unlikeliest community one could imagine or design, and says that we, representing many parts and perspectives and colors, are the Body of Christ in and for the world.