

Wars and Rumors

“Work for a climate of civility.”

2 Samuel 12:1-7a

Last in the series, The Gods Must be Crazy: Faith for troubled times

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Screaming

I heard about the first Town Hall meetings for discussing national health care and, of course, how they had quickly erupted into a shouting frenzy. The forum in Romulus earlier this month stood out; reporters said that Representative Dingell wasn't given a chance to speak.

I was outraged. I turned to my Internet search engine, googling “DINGELL TOWN HALL” so I could read more about what happened; but in addition to blogs and news columns, I also hit some You Tube videos – actual recordings of the event. So I played them. It showed the AARP man shouted down. A question was read and as soon as the representative started to speak screaming guys in the audience started scolding, “Shame on you!” “Shame on you!” and shouting labels like “Socialist!”

It was difficult to watch.

I was even more outraged. “What,” I thought, “has happened to respect?” Then I was satisfied when some friends asked the same.

The other day we were talking about it over coffee and one shook his head and said, “I don't know what's going to become of health care, or anything else for that matter.” He said, “It seems the Radical Right's incited such emotion that no one can reason any more. Government's just stalled out.”

And whether you consider yourself a subscriber of the right or the left it could seem just like that. If you favor the Democrats' recipe for America's dish these days, you might fret over Republicans' quick indictment that the “Obama Health Care Plan” is nothing but a big step toward socialism. You might want to rail against their refusal to see that the globe is warming and we are running pell-mell toward ecological catastrophe. You might be throwing up your arms over the way they are in league with big oil, big pharmaceuticals, and big every-other sort of business; and you've probably

had it with e-mail forwards that still question the validity of President Obama's birth certificate.

If you think that I just sounded like I'm in league with those folks, be patient because now I'm about to make everyone mad.

If your taste prefers Republican cuisine, you've probably just had it, too. You're probably incensed that the media picked up on the screaming man in the town hall meeting inside, but didn't cover confrontations allegedly initiated outside the hall by health care reform supporters before they went in. You might be concerned about the condition of American manufacturers during this awful economic period and want to protect them from excessive regulations that could hurt them even more. It could be that you wished they'd listen to the concerns of doctors and drug companies and people who are afraid that the government is going to dictate and delay too much of your medical care. And you are probably a little fed up with some of the characterizations of former Governor Palin that are just plain demeaning and unfair.

So there. It seems like *everyone* is at each others' throats. It seems like no one is listening to anyone and the exercise of government has more to do with pulling other people down on the way to each ones' ambition than actually taking care of the country, or the state, or town.

It's a war out there; and the weapons in use are largely rumors.

Where do we go when leaders are indicted and go to prison or disrupt their own meetings with insults and ranting and raving and digression into song? What do you do about the screaming guys that make most everyone uncomfortable and when it seems like government doesn't work? The gods must be crazy.

Navigating

Sometimes I feel like the words of Rodney King were prophetic: "Why can't we just all get along?"¹ If they'd just all be quiet and we'd all be quiet, then maybe leaders could just lead. Is that the way it is?

In a day that kings were more powerful than they are today and those who questioned them usually were silenced once-and-for-all, there was a prophet who spoke up, questioning the king who some consider the best king ever to rule.

The king was David, the youngest son of Jesse who grew up tending sheep while his brothers were fighting wars. He protected the flock, fending off lion and wolf. When the time came for him to take a stand with a bravery more courageous than the whole army of Israel, he stood against the giant and brought him down. He was anointed king by a prophet as the one God had singled out.²

As King of Israel and Judah he put enemies to flight. The people had never known such security; and David did it all while he danced and sang psalms for the Lord. Righteous, powerful, altogether popular and fair: you'd think he could do whatever he'd like.

After a while, so did he. It seems he saw a woman and fell head-over-heels for her before he knew who she was or that she was married or who she was married to. But he fell for the lies that he couldn't stop himself and could do whatever he'd like; so he committed adultery with Bathsheba. When he found out she was pregnant because of what they had done, he had her husband – one of his most loyal captains – set up in battle so that his death would be certain. Then, when Bathsheba had observed her required days of mourning, David took her into his house. You'd think he could get away with murder.³

The man who spoke up was a prophet. Nathan confronted the king. Only, he didn't scream. He didn't call names. He didn't label the king's actions *this* or *that*. He only told a parable about a rich man who had more than he'd ever need but took the prize possession of a poor man and made himself look good in the process. It was a shocking story: a heartless act was disguised as hospitality! And David was as shocked as we are, so he judged the rich man.⁴

That's when Nathan told him: "You are the man!" And David had to come face-to-face with his own sin.

Courage: to do as Nathan did. He confronted the power; still holding respect of the person, he spoke the truth; and it appeared that he actually did it in order to clear the way for David to get back to leading with righteousness and integrity once more.

Screaming guys are nothing new. The founders of our country had to deal with a press that mocked them. Whiskey distillers who didn't want to be taxed rebelled against Washington. Aaron Burr shot and killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Lincoln was insulted. Franklin Roosevelt was called a Communist. Truman was accused of

corruption. But it's likely that government has never been hampered by being held accountable for its actions.

In fact, people acting in the tradition of Nathan have tended to be voices raised as voices of God, calling for integrity and righteousness in order to help the powerful get over their power trip so they could get on with leading.

I don't like it and I don't think it helps when one side labels the other, dismisses them, and then refuses to listen. I don't like it and I don't think it helps when one group demonizes another so they can discount the perspective they bring. I don't like it and I don't think it helps when screaming men or women drown out the steady voice of one who's trying to engage.

My friends complained about the way some have dismissed the President and the Democrats like that until it occurred to me that there have been times I have done it myself. And when I said so, becoming painfully specific, they confessed it, too.

Perhaps government doesn't work when *we all* foster a climate that favors making winners and losers over working together for the common good.

Nathan wasn't out to make the king into a loser and he wasn't a screaming man. He was out to tell the truth, then he'd let the king and God take it from there.

Perhaps the role of those who follow Jesus is to make the political climate civil. I'm not sure our elected leaders can do this by themselves. I think it takes people of faith who have infiltrated the rank and file. Then ask the hard questions. Voice your opinion. Write your letters and e-mails and meet with your leaders.

Like Nathan, always engage those in power – especially if they're your best friends.

The Course of the World

Before leaving South Africa, Laura and I met with Ivan Abrahams, the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. He told us about the very strange positioning which the church had found itself since 1994, when the new constitution was put into effect and the first free election was held and Nelson Mandela, the former political prisoner was made President. The bishop told us that all the while during the struggle against apartheid; the church had been the leading voice challenging the old government. It had cost the church dearly: churches were closed, property was confiscated, leaders were jailed. And all the while, they had been in support of Nelson

Mandela and the ANC, the African National Congress. Many members of the ANC were Methodist.

Now, he said, the ANC was the established ruling party in the land. Like the Dutch Reformed Church before them, now they were the government's church. And now it was leaders from the ANC who did not always rule with integrity and righteousness, intent on liberty and justice for all. Yet they must.

Bishop Abrahams told us, if the church would still be the church now it would be difficult but necessary to be critical of those whom they had once given wholehearted support.

Engage those in power. Especially if they are your best friends.

Engage. Perhaps that's the part that the screaming men have right. Edward Kennedy Jr., the oldest son of the late senator said yesterday at his father's funeral that his father taught him to compromise, but never compromise your ideals. And Republican Senator Orin Hatch, one of Ted Kennedy's friends who sat across the aisle said, "We fought each other pretty hard, but we also came together in many, many ways over a lot of landmark legislation that today is helping people all over the country."⁵

Perhaps that's a description of a government that works. Perhaps there's a lesson in that for us all.

¹ Rodney King was beaten by Los Angeles police during his arrest, as recorded by a home video. When the police were acquitted, it touched off a riot whereupon King posed his question.

² Read I Samuel 16

³ Read II Samuel 11

⁴ Bruce C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel," *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, vol. II. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1998. p 1292.

⁵ "Hatch: Kennedy 'Love the Combat'", CBSNEWS.COM Website. Copyright ©2009 CBS Interactive Inc. <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/08/27/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry5268747.shtml>