PREACHING
in the ERA of

A Primer

O. Wesley Allen Jr.
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BROAD ISSUES

As pastors consider whether and how to deal with Trump’s oppressive rhetoric and proposed policies, there are background issues to consider. In the following essays that open this book, I offer my reflections on a variety of foundational issues for preachers to consider in light of the election of Donald Trump, and the potential for significant harm that his presidency could do to the ethical fabric of our society. While I at times turn to specific homiletical suggestions in these chapters, most of that sort of work is reserved for the second half of the book.

These reflections, then, are offered as contributions to the conversations many preachers are having internally as well as with clergy colleagues and lay members of the church. I would not expect readers to agree with every perspective I offer, but I hope that even in disagreeing with me, preachers find their views sharpened in a way that helps them better determine how to preach in this critical time.
Confessing Our Shock and Awe

I’ll admit it. When real estate mogul and reality show star Donald J. Trump came riding down the escalator at Trump Tower to announce his candidacy for the presidency in June 2015, I didn’t take him seriously. I viewed him as a rich huckster turned reality star in a show I couldn’t stand. I took the way he talked about himself as a sign of a needed-diagnosis of narcissistic megalomania. And I was aghast at the way he spoke about others, especially Mexican immigrants as rapists and drug dealers. As time progressed, I was confounded when he didn’t immediately reject endorsements by David Duke and the KKK newspaper, *The Crusader*. But that is not what I need to confess. I need to confess my own hubris in assuming everyone else would see Trump in the same way I did. I need to confess the progressive bubble in which I lived that shielded me from even having to imagine that there were enough Americans with an ideology, and even a sense of proper public etiquette and civility, so far from my own that Trump stood even the smallest of chances of being elected.

So not taking him seriously, and assuming others would not (could not) either, I followed his candidacy with intrigue. As a Democrat, I have rarely watched Republican primary
debates, but, during this election cycle, I couldn’t take my eyes off the train wreck. I binge watched coverage of the debates and the campaign trail to see what Trump would say next. What names would he call the other Republican contenders? How would he attack journalists (even Fox News journalists!) for being “unfair” to him by asking hard questions? What outrageous claim would he make without any factual support? What segment of our populace would he offend next? How would he go off message this time and be unable to keep racist, misogynist, classist inferences from vomiting forth from his dark soul? I confess that I was entertained in my disgust and assumed that most others in this country, regardless of political orientation, viewed him as I did.

And then he started winning primaries. It can’t be so! Then he won the Republican nomination. Really? How? And then...no...and then...yes...he won the general election. The first president to follow the first African American president is going to be this man? The pendulum could not possibly swing that far back to the right! And I finally turned off the television set late into the night of November 9, 2016. I couldn’t bear to watch any more what before I couldn’t stop myself from watching.

I now I find myself writing these words as President-elect Trump (yes, “President-elect”!) and his Apprentice version of a transition team work to fill out his cabinet. I write out of the fear, shock, and very real grief I feel, and which I think much of America feels. But the fact that he was elected means there are many people (at least 50 percent of the voting population, minus two or three million) who do not feel what I feel—or who are at least willing and able to overlook things I cannot. And that is what troubles me most. It was not that a person who holds and promotes views I find so abhorrent could run for office—after all, I hail from the state of George Wallace. But I could not fathom that the America I know and love, and that people in the
Church in which I profess faith when reciting the Creed and serve as clergyperson, could elect him.

My surprise likely reveals my social location. I am a white, Protestant, heterosexual, well-educated, middle-class male. I am the very image of American privilege. I have experienced the best benefits our culture has to offer. Even as a progressive who cares about social change, I have not personally felt the need for society to change so that the state of my well-being might improve. But many African Americans, women, immigrants, homosexuals, Muslims, and poor people are not surprised at all. They know how high the level of hatred and oppression in America (and in the Church) is—even if it has been expressed more subtly, while we had an African American president, than in the past and in the present. Many of them saw Trump expressing what they assume many people who look like me really think and feel. They were likely neither surprised by Trump’s election nor by the way his election has emboldened and legitimized renewed hate speech against minorities in the wake of that election.

Saturday Night Live offered a particularly insightful commentary on this situation in a skit in which a group of friends gathered to watch the election results.¹ At 6:00 p.m., all of the white progressives in the apartment were ready to celebrate Hillary Clinton’s election, but the lone Black friend (played by Dave Chappelle) interjects sarcastic remarks showing he expects Trump to win. As the evening progresses, hour by hour, the white friends move from joy to denial to despondency. Finally, at midnight, after all of the swing states have swung toward Trump, one of the white friends has a revelation: “Oh, my God, I think America is racist.” Dave Chappelle’s character responds sarcastically and hyperbolically while the recently entered Chris Rock feigns a look of surprise, “Oh, my God! You know, I remember my great-grandfather

told me something like that. [Then dismissively] But he was like a slave or something. I don’t know.”

As someone whose life and livelihood will likely change little due to the election of a candidate like Trump, I have no right, or desire, to represent the voices, experiences, or concerns of those truly threatened by a Trump presidency. I pray that what I write, instead, is an expression of solidarity with those who are very much at risk if Trump institutes many of the proposals he made during his campaign (which at the moment seems to be the case, given the kinds of cabinet and agency appointments he is lining up). I write as a progressive Christian of European descent who feels fear, anger, grief, and especially shame following the election of a leader who manifested such a lack of decorum and promoted such hatred. My fear, anger, and grief are rooted in the fact that America is so divided at the moment along lines of race, gender, class, religion, and sexual orientation. My shame is rooted in the fact that we—yes, we; not they; we, the American populace, and we, the American church—voted out of fear and hatred to promote these divisions further. I am ashamed that white, patriarchal America voted to restore a status quo of bygone years in an attempt to protect “us” from “them.”

Specifically, I write to reflect on the role of the pulpit at the beginning of this new era of Trump’s presidency. I write to and for preachers who feel called to speak prophetically over against the kinds of mean-spirited rhetoric and potentially oppressive policies we have seen in the election and expect during his time in office. I write not only to address how to preach “about” issues raised by Trump, but how to preach to a divided America that exists in and around a divided church. I write as someone striving to figure out how the church in the U.S. is to participate faithfully in the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) in the American era of Trump’s presidency.

It is important to acknowledge that I write at a different time than you read. I am writing prior to Trump’s
inauguration. My “data” comes from Trump’s election rhetoric and promises and the early days of his post-election transition. I pray that this book is unnecessary and Trump’s presidency looks and sounds radically different than did his campaign. I would love for the office to remake the man instead of the man remaking the office. But signs at the moment of my writing do not make me hopeful. I have no faith that the power that comes with his new office will temper his approach or attitude.
Whatever else Donald Trump did during the primaries and the general election, he elicited powerful emotions. He held large rallies in which crowds chanted loudly both for him and against his opponents. Violence erupted more than once—sometimes accompanied by Trump’s directions to remove protestors or promises to pay for the defense costs for such violent acts. Many outside of the circle of Trump’s camp of supporters saw these emotions as hatred inspired by the hate speech of the candidate.

Thus, one of the slogans that became popular at Hillary Clinton rallies was “Love Trumps Hate.” For the Democrat’s campaign, this slogan worked well to highlight the contrast between Trump’s desire to build a wall, deport illegal immigrants, register Muslims, enforce “law and order” over addressing the killing of young, African American men and women by police, and judge the value of women based on their looks on the one hand, and Clinton’s “big tent” approach to inclusion of the other. Indeed, while Trump’s campaign focused on re-establishing the privileged status
quo for white America, Clinton spoke of an America where power and resources were shared in many directions.

But if we are honest, those of us among the Clinton supporters can’t claim to extend the love that Trumps hate to Trump and his supporters themselves. Some of us voting against Trump have exhibited visceral emotions with intensity similar to that displayed by the Trump camp. One friend of mine confessed something to the order of, “I hate Trump. I don’t like that I feel that way because I don’t hate people. But I hate Trump.”

Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin

As an advocate of LGBTQ rights and the view that homosexuals don’t “choose” to be gay but simply are gay, I never thought I would find myself appreciating, much less quoting, the call to love the sinner but hate the sin. This call has always seemed to me to be misguided at best and hypocritical at worst. It implies that we must take a posture of loving gay people while hating their gay actions in order to convert them from being gay, and thus never really loving gay people in the first place. Such a lack of tolerance can hardly be called love.

However, while I may believe people are born gay or straight, I don’t believe anyone is born racist, patriarchal, xenophobic, ableist, heterosexist, or the like. It’s not simply “in someone’s nature” to hold prejudicial attitudes or act in a discriminatory fashion. So in terms of dealing with people who exhibit and possess these tendencies in today’s culture, I think it’s right that we strive to hate the sin but love the sinner. But even in this context, some nuance is required.

Individuals don’t “choose” to look down upon people of a different race, see women as objects, or fear Muslims. People think, feel, and act in these sorts of ways because they have been taught to do so. They have been socially constructed to respond to “others” in the way they do. In
the nature versus nurture debate, nurture wins the day in this case. So if preachers want to have an impact on transforming the church (and society) in the face of the hatred to which Donald Trump has given a national voice and that he has legitimized, we must find ways to love the sinners who have been constructed in the way they have, and hate the sin that has done the constructing.

Loving the sinner will require a sound theological understanding of the character of sin of which we speak. Too often the church talks about sins (plural) of the individual instead of sin (singular) as a power that has control of us, as Paul speaks of sin in Romans 6. This tendency manifests itself in the ways we progressive Christians focus on individual acts of oppressive hatred because of the immediacy of their impact. Any good medical provider, however, knows that if someone’s skin is breaking out in a terrible rash, you have to treat the rash directly and treat the underlying cause. Our individual sins (including individual acts of oppression) derive from this corrupting power of sin that characterizes the human condition.

Donald Trump and his most avid, Alt-right type of supporters didn’t invent discrimination. Dividing society into the haves and have-nots, the powerful and the weak, male and female, able and disabled, this religion and that, this race and that, and even “deplorables” and acceptables is an inherent part of society itself. In other words, the kinds of hatred we have seen in the Trump campaign and that we fear will grow stronger during Trump’s time in office is rooted in hatred that is a part of the structural fabric of our culture. It is systemic Sin (capital S) that, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, victimizes both the oppressed and the oppressors. So we must love all those caught in the web of Sin (including those who perpetuate it and benefit from it) while hating the Sin that is the underlying cause for the many symptoms we see erupting on the epidermis of the United States these days.
Love Your Enemies

While preachers must condemn oppressive speech and actions if we are to be faithful to the gospel, we must do so in ways that don’t condemn persons who speak and act in oppressive ways. To be sure, we must counter the speech and actions of such people, but all the while caring for their plight as well as for the plight they inflict on others by participating in a sinfulness of humanity that is much bigger than any expression of that sin. In other words, we must have Christian empathy for the decaying state of the souls of oppressors that results from the hateful attitudes in which they have been nurtured without letting that empathy in any way lead us to condoning, denying, or being silent about those attitudes.

Indeed, perhaps empathy begins with identification. Before we can effectively address the “sinners” we are to love, we must confess that we, like them, have our own brand of intolerance. We must repent of the stereotyped views we have of those who rallied around Trump, and admit we are part of “the elite” who have not understood or cared for their plight.

“Love Trumps Hate” echoes the call of Jesus to love our neighbors. During the campaign, this was a call to stand in solidarity as sisters and brothers with those who are victims of hatred and oppression, in contrast to the way Trump exploited and intensified the existing divisions of gender, ethnicity, religion, class, education, and ideology. And now that the election’s over, we must continue to embrace Jesus’ command to love not only our neighbors, but also our enemies. We must find ways to love the classist, racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic “others” in order to transform the whole of our society for the better of all in our society.

Frankly, this is a lesson we should have long learned by now. In his 1958 Stride Toward Freedom, almost sixty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. first described in detail the theory and practice involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of
1955–56. As part of his description of the boycott, King laid out the main principles of his philosophy and strategy of nonviolence as a mode of social transformation. Two of these principles recur in his later sermons, speeches, and writings throughout the Civil Rights Movement, and are especially relevant for our current discussion:

A second basic fact that characterizes nonviolence is that it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his [sic] friendship and understanding. The nonviolent resister must often express his protest through noncooperation or boycotts, but he realizes that these are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation...

A third characteristic of this method is that the attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil. It is evil that the nonviolent resister seeks to defeat, not the person victimized by evil... We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may be unjust.¹

King recognized that although they don’t suffer to the same degree as the oppressed, oppressors are also victims of oppression who are in need of liberation from systemic oppression. Love toward oppressors, then, isn’t demonstrated by some sentimental feeling, but by resisting participation in their oppression in order to free them from it. Oppressors are often unaware how much their lives are controlled by hate in trying to control the lives of others.

From a different socio-political context, Gustavo Gutiérrez makes the same type of argument as King. Writing

out of concern for the poor in Latin America, this liberation theologian also argues for a love of enemies that will convert and free the oppressor alongside the oppressed:

The universality of Christian love is only an abstraction unless it becomes concrete history, process, conflict; it is arrived at only through particularity. To love all men and women does not mean avoiding confrontation; it does not mean preserving a fictitious harmony. Universal love is that which in solidarity with the oppressed seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, and from their selfishness... One loves the oppressors by liberating them from themselves. But this cannot be achieved except by resolutely opting for the oppressed, that is, by combatting the oppressive class. It must be a real and effective combat, not hate. This is the challenge, as new as the gospel: to love our enemies... It is not a question of having no enemies, but rather of not excluding them from our love. But love does not mean that the oppressors are no longer enemies, nor does it eliminate the radicalness of the combat against them. “Love of enemies” does not ease tensions; rather it challenges the whole system and becomes a subversive formula.²

Many of us in the church “feel” the need to claim that we hate no one, that we have no enemies. But we can’t love our enemies unless we admit that we have them. However, the real enemy is evil itself—oppression and hatred that infuses humanity. This infusion means that evil is an incarnate reality, just as are love, hope, mercy, and grace. So separating

the evil from those perpetuating it is a difficult thing to do. The perspective proffered by King and Gutiérrez is absolutely necessary for a Christian approach to transforming the world and, in terms of our immediate concern, an appropriate theological and pastoral approach to preaching in response to the oppression and hate proffered by Trump and his supporters.

Preaching in the Enemy Camp

If we commit ourselves to preaching the gospel’s radical ethic concerning peace, justice, and love for all, we are going to have to speak about Trump and his supporters as well as speak to Trump supporters. This can be a frightening endeavor. Resistance to God’s good news accompanied by a long practice of co-opting the gospel to support a self-serving status quo can lead to unhealthy and strident reactions when attempting to embrace the countercultural nature of the Christian life and Christian community. Preachers become vulnerable when they speak as prophets.

Yet our strategy isn’t simply to speak the gospel, but to get the gospel heard, believed, and lived. Therefore, preaching the gospel’s radical ethic concerning peace, justice, and love for all—not only in response to Trump and his supporters, but also directly to Trump supporters—is a great opportunity. Many mainline preachers dismiss the liturgical practice of offering invitations to conversion, but the current political reality calls us to re-embrace preaching for decision in a way that invites misogynists, racists, homophobes, and xenophobes to repent, be born again, and experience the freedom and joy of becoming a new creation.

If our prophetic tone is one of blame and shame, then such invitations won’t be inviting. As we know, guilt and condemnation rarely inspire a new approach to life. We certainly need to speak honestly and clearly about the evil we are confronting, but the weight of the sermon needs to be on
good news instead of the bad news. To use Eugene Lowry’s language, every sermon needs to move from an itch to a scratch,³ and the scratch must always be stronger than the itch.

In the “itch portion” of a prophetic sermon that intends to help liberate hearers from being trapped in the deadly cycle of oppression, the preacher must name and show the evil being addressed in ways that not only give hearers new tools for thinking about the problem, but also offer an experience of the evil they must reject and resist, even if they have embodied it in the past. As Michael Brothers has pointed out in his book Distance in Preaching, one way to do this is to create some distance between the hearer and the topic.⁴ Instead of directly naming the ways hearers in the room have exhibited xenophobic attitudes and acted in xenophobic ways, we can provide examples of such attitudes and actions by others “out there,” examples that even those who share the attitudes would experience as morally objectionable. Then, give the hearers room to make the connection to their own attitudes and actions instead of pounding the illustrations into them.

Another way to create an experience of the evil we want hearers to reject is to put a face on its victims. For most people, it’s a lot easier to oppress someone or some group in the abstract than in the specific. A strategy often employed by the LGBTQ community is to forego arguments about nature versus nurture or the interpretation of biblical passages and instead show that the debate about homosexuality is about real human beings. Someone who is homophobic may feel no fear of or hatred for Lisa and her spouse, Mandy. Indeed, when someone hears the story of how they have been targeted


⁴ See Michael A. Brothers, Distance in Preaching: Room to Speak, Room to Listen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).
just for loving each other, they may feel sympathy and grow to experience righteous indignation on their behalf.

Once an itch with some distance and perhaps a face on it has been created, preachers can lovingly nudge the hearers toward embracing a “scratch” that views strangers differently, leads toward a new ethic in dealing with strangers, and offers liberation from fearing the other. Distance can still be the preacher’s friend in this portion of the sermon. Instead of using imperatives and telling hearers that they ought to think, feel, or do such-and-such, the preacher can tell a story of someone (or some community) moving from despising strangers to embracing the stranger. Showing is always more inviting than telling.

Because we are taking a cumulative approach to dealing with social issues raised during the era of Trump, not all of our stories in the scratch portion of sermons need to be grand tales to offer meaningful experiences. They simply need to be real.

You can tell the story of a congregation that decided to offer sanctuary to an immigrant who was going to be deported.

You can tell of the congregation so concerned about talking of radical Islamic terrorists while knowing so little about Islam that they invited a group of Muslims to lead a Q&A session at the church, and how that session led to an open dialogue between the local church and the local mosque.

You can tell the story of a white, teenage girl who was so inspired after visiting an African American worship service she wanted to visit a Chinese service and a Hispanic one.

You can tell the story of the prayer vigil in a small town in Indiana that, on the night of 9/11, included prayers for the victims, prayers for justice, and prayers for peace offered by Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish clergy and laity.

You can tell of a college student’s study abroad that changed not only his view of the world but also his theology
and sense of vocation, leading him to change his major from business to religious studies and international affairs.

Given the use of social media in the 2016 campaign, you can even tell of something as simple as a Reddit thread in which people debated whether Trump’s suggestion to register Muslims was ultimately about fear of Islam or not.5 In the discussion were voices defending Trump’s position, including one that explained that, in their view, the issue wasn’t really religion anyway. To this person, the proposal was about registering people from Muslim-majority countries, so even a Christian Syrian refugee would have to register. Another person responded, “Let’s flood the registry with Methodist Muslims, Baptism Muslims, Lutheran Muslims, Pentecostal Muslims, Anabaptist Muslims, etc.” And then, echoing Martin Niemöller’s statement condemning silence in the face of Nazi violence, the respondent concluded, “First they came for the Muslims, and we said, NOT THIS TIME.”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if this happened? If we have learned our history lesson, it may be different this time. And wouldn’t it be great if the ecumenical church that, in the past, has participated in the oppression of others this time banded together for their protection?

Wouldn’t it be great this time if the church decided to be the church?

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5 https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/5doj33/if_muslims_are_forced_to_register_in_the_us_we/
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In the arena of preaching and worship, Allen has special interest in rethinking the role of preaching and liturgy in the shifting, postmodern world of the twenty-first century. Other books published with Chalice Press include *Preaching Resurrection* and *Preaching and Reading the Lectionary: The Three Dimensions of the Liturgical Year*. 
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