

NOTHING ON MY LIPS BUT HALLELUJAH

November 19, 2017 by Pilar Millhollen

Readings: *What Happened* (Hillary Rodham Clinton); 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Earlier this week, a post I had put up exactly one year ago appeared at the top of my Facebook feed. The post had a still shot of a white pants-suited Kate McKinnon, one of the lead comedians on Saturday Night Live. She sat in a spotlight at an elegant grand piano with a caption that I had written underneath. "And even though it all went wrong," I wrote, "I'll stand before the Lord of song, with nothing on my lips but 'Hallelujah.'" This was a reference to a poignant lyric from Leonard Cohen's famous pop song, which McKinnon gracefully paid homage to in honoring the composer's recent death. What was more poignant, at least for me and many other women I know, was the meaning that the song took on with McKinnon depicting Hillary Rodham Clinton, the former New York Senator and Secretary of State who days earlier was anticipated to become the first female president of the United States. Despite winning the popular vote by almost 3 million, in a stunning turn of events, the electoral college awarded the presidency to her opponent, who was historically considered the least qualified and generally the most dangerous person ever to run. Singing "Hallelujah" in that context, in that iconic white suit that Clinton wore as a symbol for the white-clad Suffragettes of the last century, turned what had been a traumatizing week for me and many others into a hallowed moment of catharsis. The song, which had never meant much to me before, suddenly became a hymn to finding the holy in abject failure, the sacred in profound loss. I realize that bringing up this particular person may hold an array of various feelings for you now. Hillary Rodham Clinton was never a sainted figure; between the various decisions she made as a politician attached to big banks and the unforgiving association the public has made with her controversial husband, former President Bill Clinton, she has certainly always come with, as you might say, baggage. But alongside her very human flaws - which I would argue our cultural misogyny magnified tenfold next to her male colleagues - is most certainly a keenly talented, highly intelligent woman who spent a lifetime as a public servant and advocate for women and children. And whatever else you might describe her as, we can all agree that she is a fighter. For someone in my generation, she represented exactly what I was taught I could be, raised with a kind of "gender blindness" that made me believe I could do anything I wanted if I had the ability. So when she lost - and how - and *to whom* - something was shattered. Not just in me, but in the majority of voting Americans. It was the belief that we had turned a corner as a country, the hope that our history of racism and sexism was actually becoming just that - a part of history - a certainty that we knew better, that our collective morality would deliver us from the degradation of our dark past. But in the words of social analyst Ta-Nehisi Coates, "It is not so much that I should have predicted that Americans would elect Donald Trump. It's just that I shouldn't have put it past us."

The holiday season always unearths a slew of mixed emotions - joy, gratitude and awe often mingle with sadness, anger, even despondency inspired by past losses, unaired grievances, unprocessed pain. But kicking off our American holiday season with Thanksgiving in 2016 felt particularly grotesque, because both individuals were in pain, and the country was in shock. And whatever side folks were on, there was a general sense of total disruption - a 'not knowing'-ness that felt profoundly destabilizing. I found myself often wondering, if it was this hard to find gratitude for so many of us as Thanksgiving approached, what was it like for Hillary Clinton?

So a couple of months ago, when her eagerly anticipated book entitled *What Happened* hit the shelves and subsequently flew off of them with record sales, I was about to find out when my mother announced that she bought two copies, one in hardback and one on audio. I was visiting her in Portland when the book arrived in the mail, and as she has difficulty with her eyes, she asked me to spend a couple of hours each night reading the book aloud to her. A memoir of Clinton's time in politics, particularly leading up to and following the 2016 election, I wasn't prepared for the impact her story would have on either of us. My mother had always seen Hillary as a kind of savior, a champion for the causes that she had participated in so rigorously in her young adulthood. "Hillary was able to do what we all fought so hard for – and she ended up taking the hits for all of us," my mother often said. I was less connected to her up until she hit the campaign trail, but began to understand why when my mother pointed out, "You don't know what it was like for us. You can't know, and I'm glad you don't – we had a handful of choices if we wanted careers. I couldn't open a credit card in my own name without my husband's approval. I remember wishing as a child that I was born a boy because I saw the advantages my brothers had." Reading through Hillary's book together was like lifting a veil, bringing up memories, both terrible and wonderful, and insights into the details of her work for decades on healthcare, voting rights and child advocacy that resonated deeply with my own call to ministry. Between laughing and crying and contemplating, her writing was also deeply theological. So much of it reflected a faith that she grew up with and had internalized in her Methodist tradition, a faith based in radical hope but rooted firmly in the realities of a world that needs more good works. This kind of faith, deeply influenced by the Apostle Paul, echoes in our passage from Paul's letter to the community at Thessalonica. The Pauline letters, like a memoir, are intimately personal; they reflect the relationship that Paul developed with the various Jesus-following communities throughout the empire, many of which he never met face to face but was inextricably connected to via his call to ministry of the gospel. Paul was also an intensely controversial figure: his message, like a politician, seemed to shift and change depending on the community he was addressing. He was, at once, both a radical anarchist and an imperial conformist; a feminist and a patriarch; a traditionalist and a revolutionary. And given the setting in which he chose to minister, it is not surprising that the risk he took to make concrete social changes included trying to be all things to all people. This first letter to the Thessalonians, however, reads like a love letter – a cheerleading moment to lift up the good work and the moral courage of the Thessalonians in spite of profound opposition from the greater Roman culture in Macedonia. Earlier in the letter, Paul reminds them of the hardships that he and Silas had suffered at Philippi as missionaries, referring to their public beating and imprisonment, holding up a mirror to the difficulties that the Thessalonians have also had to face. He identifies his own ability to go on with their ability to hold onto God's love through holding onto each other – "in spite of persecution," he reports, "you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Unlike many of his other letters, which include lengthy exhortations to behave better, Paul celebrates the love that the Thessalonians have expressed toward each other when they could have easily turned against or abandoned each other in difficulty. But he also continually drives home the message that part of their faith would always include opposition, and indeed, failure: "when we could bear it no longer, we sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith, so that no one would be shaken by

these persecutions. Indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for.” The struggle, he’s saying, is part of the deal. This reads like a set up for our passage from chapter 5, which departs from the previous tone of the letter into a bit of a warning: he has repeated to his audience that they don’t really need to have anything spelled out for them since they’re pretty on top of their game, yet he takes this final chapter to remind them that life simply isn’t linear. He references, as Amos did in our text last week, the coming “Day of the Lord,” which for Paul and his early Jesus-followers was expected to arrive at any moment. Even though it did not, Paul’s lesson became timeless: at the moment we get too comfortable, our world can get turned upside down. While he uses more dramatic language – “when they say ‘there is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them,” his point applies to war and famine but also to all that we’ve worked toward as justice seekers – to healthcare, to individual rights, to economic parity, to healing of the earth. It applies to our personal struggles with ourselves – the demons that keep us from fulfilling our potential, the histories that affect our close relationships. It applies to betrayals, to loss, to addiction. But rather than an apocalyptic lesson about constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop, Paul gives them an affirmation – “you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day.” He uses the metaphor of keeping awake as a kind of spiritual attentiveness; in other language, mindfulness. “Since we belong to the day,” he concludes, “let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” Putting on the breastplate of faith and love is the antidote to the uncertainty, a salve for the “not knowing.” In a collective time where we pause to reflect on exactly what we’re thankful for, we who strive to be children of the light have the distinct honor of finding gratitude in the muck and not only in the beauty. The spiritual writer Anne LaMott spins it this way: the three essential prayers that any human being will ever utter are “Help,” “Thanks,” and “WOW.” As Clinton reminded us in her reflection on Henri Nouwen’s discipline of gratitude, “it’s up to us to be grateful even when things aren’t going well. To be grateful even for our flaws, for in the end, they make us stronger by giving us a chance to reach beyond our grasp.” And part of that reaching is reflecting backward on what went wrong, and what went right, in order to keep awake as we hope for the tide to turn.

Hillary Clinton isn’t perfect. Neither was Paul. Or Henri Nouwen, or any other number of remarkable people who have made a profound impact on our world. But I would argue that it is their flaws as much as their gifts that contributed to their positive influence. Paul’s rhetoric has been used to denigrate and silence. Clinton’s political decisions sometimes hurt a great number of people. Nouwen suffered from clinical depression and internalized homophobia that he never reconciled. Yet all three put on the breastplate of faith and love when all they had was adversity, when things did not turn out the way they expected, when the only prayer on their lips had to have been “Help.” And the impact they had in healing what is broken and mending what is torn will live on in our collective consciousness because of this, as we glean a deeper connection to why we are here, what we can make of our lives, and what our world may look like in the future.

This Thanksgiving, one year out from that fateful day, it may sound simplistic but guess what: we’re still here. We get out of bed in the morning, we attend to the tasks of our day, we do the best we can with whatever we’ve been given – and sometimes that doesn’t include epic court battles for justice or becoming the teacher of the year. Sometimes it is

about washing dishes; sometimes it is about sitting shiva in silence. Sometimes it is “WOW,” sometimes it is “thanks,” and sometimes it is “help.”

Clinton’s book *What Happened* is more than a memoir; it is a testament for the millions of Americans, particularly women, who did not know how to respond when all that they thought they could count on went wrong. It is, like Paul’s letter, a thesis to keep on keepin’ on. It woke me up as it reminded me that the beloved community, while we work tirelessly toward it, is yet to be a reality; but it also served to heal the part of me – and I believe the part of my mother too – that was shattered by last November’s events. Part of the healing came in reading that for all the loss, Clinton concludes that she would do it again – and if she can say that, so can we. It made the last lyrics of Cohen’s “Hallelujah” seem both intensely personal and broadly universal, as if the Clinton character was singing not just for herself, but for all of us:

*I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool ya
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the Lord of song
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah*

Paul’s followers didn’t get to see the Day of the Lord when they expected it. But they were still there, doing what they had to do, reaching beyond themselves out to one another in triumph and through failure. Keep doing what you’re doing, Paul says to them, and I think it’s because he and they implicitly knew what Cohen puts so simply: that love is not a victory march, it’s a cold and it’s a broken ‘Hallelujah.’ Maybe your prayer this week isn’t help, thanks, or wow; maybe it’s a mixture of all three. And maybe it’s none at all. In the discipline of gratitude, maybe it’s just taking a moment to connect your feet to the ground, to breathe, and to recognize that you here. That you are loved. And that you are love.

Happy Thanksgiving – and Amen.