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 Arlington Street Church
 6 November, 2016

After November 8th
for Doc Kinne and his sister, Kristen

The election season has been hard on my sense of humor; precious little is making me laugh these days. There's this, though, from *New Yorker* writer Paul Simms' piece entitled "G*d's Blog." Here is the Creator of the Universe blogging about Genesis, and – of course – comments.

G*D:

Pretty pleased with what I've come up with in just six days. Going to take tomorrow off. Feel free to check out what I've done so far. Suggestions and criticism (constructive, please!) more than welcome....

COMMENTS:

Not sure who this is for. Seems like a fix for a problem that didn't exist. Liked it better when the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep.

Going carbon-based for the life-forms seems a tad obvious, no?

The creeping things that creepeth over the earth are gross....

Unfocused. Seems like a mishmash at best. You've got creatures that can speak but aren't smart (parrots). Then, You've got creatures that are smart but can't speak (dolphins, dogs, houseflies). Then, You've got man, who is smart and can speak but who can't fly, breathe underwater, or unhinge his jaws to swallow large prey in one gulp. If it's supposed to be chaos, then mission accomplished. But it seems more like laziness and bad planning....

Not enough action. Needs more conflict. Maybe put in a whole bunch more people ... give them different skin colors so they can tell each other

apart ...limit the resources, and see if we can get some fights going....¹

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O, the comments! Incivility, precious little praise or thanksgiving, and zero empathy: I fear the end of civil discourse in America. It's all just plain ugly.

I know that many of us are very focused on Tuesday. Prayer is very possibly at an all-time high, enjoying new popularity among those of us who begin our prayers "To whom it may concern," and even among those who are praying to a god they don't believe in. But today, I invite you to join me in choosing to focus beyond Tuesday, something even bigger than the outcome of this election. Prayers aside, and regardless of the outcome, we have a lot of work to do to regain our balance, ground ourselves, start listening and talking with people who are very different from us, and get back to that little biblical directive to "do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly" with our higher power.² G*d saw that it was good; not perfect, but good. We have a lot of work to do to recover from ugly, and get back to good.

The normally conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks has astounded me recently – most recently,³ in a conversation with *On Being's* Krista Tippett. He said this: "I long for a more active religious voice in the public square.... We need to become more communitarian in a society that has become too individual. We need to become more moralistic in a society that's too utilitarian. And we need to be more emotional in a society that's too cognitive. And religion speaks those three languages very well."⁴

My ears perk up. Did he say "an active religious voice?" Did he say communitarian, moralistic, emotional – we might translate that to communitarian, ethical, and heartfelt? He did! He's talking about us. And then this, from his column entitled *The Death of Idealism*:

"There is no uplift in this race... There is an assumption ... that we are self-seeking creatures, rather than also loving, serving, hoping, dreaming, cooperating creatures...." The great challenge, he says, "... is the crisis of

¹ Paul Simms, "G*d's Blog, *The New Yorker*, 8/8/11

² Micah 6:8

³ 10/20/16

⁴ Please see onbeing.org/program/david-brooks-and-ej-dionne-sinfulness-hopefulness-and-the-possibility-of-politics/9001

our isolation and fragmentation, the need to rebind the fabric of a society ... torn by selfishness, cynicism, distrust, and autonomy.” *We are called to restore idealism.*⁵

I’m hearing a directive here. David Brooks is talking about us, and he’s talking to us. He tells Krista Tippet, “I was in Frederick, Maryland, I don’t know how many years ago, and I ran into these ladies. There were probably 30 of them, aged 50 to 80, who teach immigrants [to speak] English and then how to read it. And I walk into the room, and they just radiate patience and goodness, Dorothy Day directness, just that calmness. They ... just ... radiated light. I remember thinking, ‘I’ve achieved way more career success than I ever thought I would, but I don’t have [what they have].”⁶ “At some point,” he continues, “there will have to be a new vocabulary and a restored anthropology, emphasizing love, friendship, faithfulness, solidarity, and neighborliness that pushes people toward connection rather than distrust.”⁷

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On the eve of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as the sixteenth president of the United States. Seven southern states had seceded from the Union. Desperate to prevent the unspeakable carnage that was to follow, he made this impassioned plea:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.⁸

O, those better angels! Can we imagine what’s possible? Can we live into the root meaning of the word religion, possibly from the Latin *ligare*, “to bind or connect?” *Re-ligare* means we do it again: we reconnect; we are bound to one another in Dr. King’s “inescapable network of mutuality,”⁹

⁵ David Brooks, “The Death of Idealism,” *New York Times*, 9/30/16

⁶ Please see onbeing.org/program/david-brooks-and-ej-dionne-sinfulness-hopefulness-and-the-possibility-of-politics/9001

⁷ David Brooks, “The Death of Idealism,” *New York Times*, 9/30/16

⁸ Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, Monday, March 4, 1861

⁹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, 4/16/63

Unitarian Universalism's "interdependent web." Dr. Carl Jung said, "We walk around in shoes far too small for us." Can we step into bigger shoes, take bigger steps, leave bigger footprints? I know we can.

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Where to begin? I say we begin with the first principle of Unitarian Universalism: a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every being. *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne says, "If I made a hat, ... it would [say], *Make America Empathetic Again*." He's not just calling out people who espouse deplorable views on disability, immigration, Islam, Judaism, race, women, everything. He's calling out each and every one of us. We need to make the first move, because there are people who are so beaten down and fearful, who feel so unsafe, that they cannot muster any empathy. We need, says David Brooks, "humility, radical self-awareness from a position of other-centeredness, [and a transformative conviction in] the deep equality of all human beings, because each of us [is] broken in similar ways."¹⁰

Imagine the spiritual crisis among people whose religion tells them to welcome the stranger, love one another, turn the other cheek, love their enemy ... but who simply cannot do it. Rather than recoil in horror at falling so short, can we stand up and step in? Our Unitarian forbear, Ralph Waldo Emerson, said, "Souls are not saved in bundles."¹¹ It's all about the one soul before us: Can we engage those who seem so different from us? Can we just listen? Can we try to understand their "side?" Can we find some common ground, and so begin the work of dismantling the walls between "us" and "them?"

When he was retiring from the *Washington Post*, William Raspberry, an African American liberal, received a letter from a self-described "white, more-or-less conservative Republican" that said, in part, "You may well imagine that we will at some times differ. But it is because of your clear and cogent explanations of your viewpoints that I am able to understand why some people hold opinions and values different from my own, and how their experiences have produced what seems to them reasonable beliefs. Because you do this, and do not simply rant at me ... I can appreciate and understand and respect those ideas, even when I do not agree with them. And it does happen, rather often, actually, that you convince me that I don't

¹⁰ Please see onbeing.org/program/david-brooks-and-ej-dionne-sinfulness-hopefulness-and-the-possibility-of-politics/9001

¹¹ Ralph *Waldo Emerson, from "Worship" in *The Conduct of Life* (1860)

know what I am talking about and that yours is the correct understanding."¹² William Raspberry was rightfully proud of this letter. And I am moved by the letter writer's willingness to read him and change his mind.

He continues, "...Decades before the open warfare that now passes as political debate, ... I [became] more and more convinced that ... [exaggerating] differences [was] exacerbating the political division I find so dangerous in America.... I was also starting to imagine ... that talking about issues might actually make a positive difference, might move us an inch or two nearer common ground.

"Perhaps it was then that I found myself trying to write in such a way that people who didn't agree with me might at least hear me. Then I found that they were [responding] to me in similarly civil tones. And it felt good...."¹³

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Eboo Patel, founding president of Interfaith Youth Core, tells the story of Vincent Harding, the great Civil Rights leader, saying to him, "This business of being a multiracial, multiethnic, multi-religious, democratic society: we've only been doing this for 50 years." "What I loved about Vincent, Eboo Patel says, is that he would open his speeches by saying, "I live in a country that does not yet exist." Not a country that no longer exists, but a country that does not yet exist."¹⁴

I want to close with a story – a true story – told by E.J. Dionne. "In D.C.," he says, "I have ... friends named Kathy and David, and they had a kid who ... had a friend who had no real home. Hid dad had split, mom had drug and health problems. So they said to the kid, 'Come over. Stay with us. You can live with us. Eat.... Go to school.' And that kid had a friend in the same circumstance, and that kid had a friend.

"If you go to ... their house – and I do every Thursday, and hopefully on Mondays – there [are] 10, 15, 25 kids there, 18 to 22 [years old], just

¹² Up to here, this paragraph was inadvertently deleted from the sermon text from which I preached. Oy!

¹³ William Raspberry, Our Civil Disagreement, *The Washington Post*, 12/19/05. Please see washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/18/AR2005121800884.html

¹⁴ Eboo Patel talking with Krista Tippett. Please see onbeing.org/program/Natasha-trethewey-and-eboo-patel-how-to-live-beyond-this-election/transcript/9015#main_content

getting some food. Last week, a young woman came; ... she was 21. This was the first time she'd been around a dinner table, [she said,] since she was 11. And I took my daughter, ... and she said, 'This is the warmest home I've ever been in.' They call Kathy and David Mom and Dad, and there's just a warmth and embrace. What we give them – we, [the] adults – we give them the gift of being their audience.

“So there's this kid named Ed who would read from his flip phone poetry he'd written. There's a woman named Kasari who would sing like a New Orleans jazz singer. And you just receive them, and they define themselves in front of you. And what they gave us was a complete intolerance for social distance.... When I meet most of you, I shake hands, and there's a little distance there because we don't really know each other. But the first time I walked into their house, I reached my hand out to one of the kids, and he said, 'We don't shake hands here. We hug.'”

E.J. Dionne told this story in a forum with Krista Tippett, and a guy named Bill Milliken was in the audience. Bill has been working with youth who are in trouble. He said, “I'm often asked, 'In 50 years of doing this, what programs work to turn around lives?' And he [answered,] 'I've done this 50 years. I've never seen a program turn around a life. I see relationships turn around lives, and I see love turn around lives.’”¹⁵

Beloved spiritual companions,
Let ours be an active religious voice:
communitarian, ethical, heartfelt.

Saying *yes* to the better angels of our nature,
may we step into bigger shoes, take bigger steps,
leave bigger footprints.

It's all about the one soul before us.
Let us go first, and venture onto the common ground
of a country that does not yet exist,
where don't shake hands; we hug.

Love turns around lives.

¹⁵ D.B. Dionne talking with Krista Tippett. Please see onbeing.org/program/david-brooks-and-ej-dionne-sinfulness-hopefulness-and-the-possibility-of-politics/9001

Let's do this together.
I love you.

Amen.