



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Dear reader, I'm writing to you from church. Seriously, I'm sitting on the red-velvety back pew of First Presbyterian, where we're hosting a prayer vigil for Mental Health Awareness today. I volunteered to man the sanctuary for a couple of hours, and since I'm virtually incapable of praying for two *minutes* straight, much less two hours, I thought it best to bring a notebook and pen. (A computer just seemed tacky.)

Today is November 7th, and the vigil has been scheduled for months. People keep asking if the date was intentional – if we *meant* to pray about mental illness on the day after the midterm elections – and I assure them the timing was pure coincidence. But I'm not even sure *I* believe that. The Lord works in mysterious ways, after all.

Frankly, I'm feeling more mentally stable than usual today, though, granted, that's a pretty low bar. I probably shouldn't be pondering astrology here in the presence of Jesus and John Calvin, but I think my sense of balance – so essential to us Libras – has been restored by yesterday's election. Had there been an actual "blue wave" or a "red tide" or whatever nautical metaphor floats your boat, I don't think I'd be feeling quite so sane in the membrane. And I suspect there'd be more folks in this sanctuary right now praying for their *own* equilibrium.

But as it stands, things seem better today than they have in ages. As a good friend remarked on Facebook this morning: "There was something for everybody last night." To which I replied, "Feels good."

It was genuinely lovely to see my Dem friends celebrating Joe Cunningham's win, which came in the wee hours after many had gone to bed. I voted for Joe myself, and as I scrolled through Facebook past all those happy posts and threads, I felt the familiar pain of my own self-imposed exile from partisan politics. (It can be lonely without a tribe.) But then I thought about the large

posse of angry Democrats – some of the same people now rejoicing – I'd seen gang up on a lone Republican in their midst just a few days earlier on FB. I thought about the way they'd berated and ridiculed this good woman – a local friend, not just some stranger – and I remembered why I don't participate. Not only am I too ideologically impure for either party, but mob mentality scares the heck out of me. I've seen it turn perfectly nice people into social media monsters far too many times. It's too easy to get drunk on partisan politics now, so I no longer touch the stuff.

This abstinence often draws criticism from my friends on both sides of the aisle. But I can't stomach it when

they

go all torches-and-pitchforks on each other, so I guess we're mutually disaffected. And I'm not gonna lie; it especially bugs me when Democrats behave this way. They're supposed to be the party of community and compassion and sharing the wealth, something the Republicans – with their darker view of human nature – have never claimed to be. The Democrats espouse this beautiful vision of society that I, for one, would love to embrace; but nobody's convinced me it's realistic. If you want people to board the Love Train, you have to sell it. People won't believe in the Love Train – much less hop on board – if the conductor and all the attendants are always talking smack about them in the train station and cussing them to their faces on the platform.

God help me, I'm sitting here in church having all these untoward, unholy thoughts. And in this solemn place, where people are actually trying to pray, the scratch of my pen on paper sounds louder than the pipe organ on Sunday, but the thoughts are pouring out so fast, and somebody's got to catch them before they evaporate into the ether.

While driving to the prayer vigil earlier, I heard the NPR guys saying that, despite my newfound sense of balance, the midterm elections reflect a country deeply entrenched in its division; that Donald Trump is now clearly "king of red state America" while blue state America not only despises him, but is hard-pressed to accept his presidency as legitimate. Here in the cosmopolitan little coastal town of Beaufort, SC, I feel like a citizen of both red *and* blue America. I like it like that, but it's getting harder to manage. I sometimes feel invisible drawbridges coming up around me. Invisible moats being dug.

When I was a little girl in Alabama, in the '70s, we used to play Rebels vs. Yankees on the playground. We had no real understanding of what those words meant – beyond the geographical connotations – but they gave us an excuse to split up into teams and chase each other around the monkey bars. We knew there'd been a war back in the olden days, but that meant little to us kids at Walter Jackson Elementary. We had no serious pride of ownership

Profane Thoughts from a Sacred Space

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when it came to these titles, beyond the simple pride of place. We southern kids slightly preferred being Rebels, but we took turns, and I always felt kind of exotic when I was a Yankee. It was a lot like playing Cowboys and Indians – something I suppose you can't get away with anymore, much like Rebels vs. Yankees – and both teams were cool. But here's something else I remember, and my actual point: Back then, being Republicans and Democrats felt very similar. Like a friendly rivalry. Those affiliations weren't all-defining, and they certainly weren't all-dividing. My parents hung out with both Democrats *and* Republicans, and it wasn't until I'd grown to adulthood that I even knew that. It simply never entered my mind to wonder about the politics of our friends. I think Alabama football was more divisive than partisan politics back then. In my family, there were both Alabama

and

Auburn alumni, and I could never decide who to root for. The birth of a centrist.

Those were innocent days – in my life *and* the country's. It seems that way to me, anyway, but others would surely disagree. It's all relative, all a matter of experience. We can never recover that innocence – we're all too experienced now – but maybe we can build something new. Maybe?

I'm thinking about all this as I come to the end of my two-hour shift in the sanctuary. People have come and gone, candles have been lit and burned out, tears have been shed and wiped away. Not having prayed worth a damn, myself – as usual – I return to the prayer booklet I've already read cover to cover, a mix of scripture and poetry and other short meditations. I'm struck, again, by the passage from Romans 8 that grabbed me when I first sat down:

"The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

I close my prayer book, sigh a sigh too deep for words, and walk out into the bright fall, where a friend waits to relieve me.