

## Preaching in a Politically Divided Age: An Interview with Luis León\* and Randolph (Randy) Marshall Hollerith\*\*

*From the Editor:* The following article offers the responses of two leading Episcopal priests in contexts uniquely focused on the national political scene: the Rev. Luis León (LL), recently retired long-term rector of St. John's, Lafayette Square, across from the White House, and the Very Rev. Randy Hollerith (RW), current dean of the Washington National Cathedral. I posed some questions to them, and the results are, I hope you will agree, both informative and fascinating.

*Talk about your own vocational trajectory:*

**LL:** I had the privilege and joy of serving as assistant rector of St. Peter's Church in Charlotte, North Carolina for three years, and then rector of St. Paul's Church, Paterson, New Jersey for six years, and rector of Trinity Church, Wilmington, Delaware for six years. It was then that I received the call to become rector of St. John's Church, Lafayette Square, in Washington, DC, where I served for twenty-four years, retiring at the end of May 2018.

**RH:** I have been a parish priest for almost twenty-eight years, serving parishes in Richmond, Virginia and Savannah, Georgia. When I accepted the call to become dean of Washington National Cathedral, I was in my sixteenth year as the rector of St. James's Church in Richmond, a wonderful parish where my wife Melissa and I raised our children. However, I am a native of Alexandria, Virginia, and working at the cathedral felt like coming home. I have to admit that being the dean of a Gothic cathedral is very different from anything I have done before.

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\* Luis León retired in May of 2018 as rector of Saint John's, Lafayette Square, Washington D.C., where he served since 1994. A native of Cuba, Leon came to the United States in 1961 as part of the Peter Pan flights. He teaches courses in parish building and stewardship nationwide.

\*\* Randolph (Randy) Marshall Hollerith was installed as dean of Washington National Cathedral in August of 2016. Hollerith served in parishes in Richmond, Virginia and Savannah, Georgia before coming to the cathedral.

*Tell us about this last or current place: How is it unique? How is it similar to other churches? What is its connection to our nation's political life?*

*LL:* St. John's, Lafayette Square is sometimes called "the Church of the Presidents," inasmuch as every president since James Madison, the first president when the church was built, has attended at least one time. I have had the opportunity to preach during three presidential administrations—President Bill Clinton, President George W. Bush, and President Barack Obama, when they were present during a worship service. I was also privileged to offer the opening prayer for President Bush's second inauguration and the closing prayer for President Obama's second inauguration. The church has also had members of the Senate and the House of Representatives attend and participate in the congregation. At the same time, St. John's is like every congregation in the United States, and every congregation in which I previously served, and indeed like every congregation since the time of Paul and the early church.

*RH:* Located on the highest spot in Washington, D.C., the cathedral was founded to fulfill Pierre L'Enfant's vision of a "great church for national purposes." As a cathedral in the Episcopal Church, it has been throughout its history a progressive presence in the city, often speaking out in ways that are challenging to the political status quo in Washington. At the same time, it has been a place of national celebration and sorrow, holding inaugural prayer services for many of our presidents as well as numerous presidential and state funerals. In this sense, the cathedral has a prophetic role but not a partisan role, and this can be a delicate balancing act. We always want to shine the light of the gospel on government while trying to rise above partisan politics so that we can be an honest broker in the city.

*Does your preaching change if you know the president or some other leader is present?*

*LL:* When I was interviewed for the position, I was asked if I would change my sermon if I knew the president of the United States would be in attendance. I answered, "No, I would hope that the president would be glad to hear the same words that the rest of the congregation would hear on any given Sunday." I still believe that is the correct posture for preaching at St. John's.

*RH:* I always try to be true to the readings for a given Sunday. If you are worrying about who might be in the congregation that only gets in the way. Moreover, we have no idea when someone in Congress or the administration is going to show up for a Sunday morning service. In the end, I hope that if I am honest, prayerful, and try to preach with integrity, that my sermons will speak authentically regardless of who may or may not be in the congregation.

*How do you deal with controversial issues? What is the role of civility in the life and proclamation of the cathedral?*

*LL:* Throughout the years I have created a list that helps address controversial issues from the pulpit in a politically divided age. Some learnings have come from classes and some from personal relationships. While rector of St. Paul's Church in Paterson, New Jersey, I attended summer workshops on preaching led by William Sloane Coffin, who at the time was pastor of the Riverside Church. I constantly reviewed the notes I took in class. Here are some of the important learnings I gained from Mr. Coffin's class.

"Controversial issues should be broached with great pastoral care. Unity is based not on agreement but on mutual concern." Stephen Carter would add to this in his book *Civility*. He defined civility this way: "Civility . . . is the sum of the many sacrifices we are called to make for the sake of living together. I do not see our politics as the cause of our growing incivility. Our politics is the fruit of the growing incivility. If we expect better from office holders and candidates and activists, we have to demand better from ourselves."<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:54–55 NEB states, "When the disciples James and John saw this they said, 'Lord, may we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village."

Mr. Coffin also taught that "dignity is never obtained at the expense of specificity. Preachers tend to generalize when preaching about controversial issues for two reasons. The preacher hasn't done her/his homework and so they choose to generalize and they want to soften their statements in order not to jeopardize their congregations' affection for them." If the preacher is going to tackle controversial

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 11; Stephen L. Carter, "Depressed by Our Politics? Stop Staring at Your Phone," *Bloomberg Opinion*, February 22, 2017. <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-02-22/depressed-by-our-politics-stop-staring-at-your-phone>.

issues it is of utmost importance that the preacher know the specifics of what will be addressed.

*RH:* After the tragedy in Charlottesville, the cathedral's two-year process of conversation and education around the two Confederate windows in the nave had to be cut short. It became clear that the windows were becoming a real obstacle for many people, and they needed to come down sooner rather than later. Throughout that process, in everything we said and did, we tried to promote civil discourse and a deeper understanding.

For many people in the cathedral and the Diocese of Washington, those windows were a painful reminder of the Jim Crow era in our country and the rise of the Old South narrative. For others, they were part of the sacred fabric of the building, and while they represented a painful time in our nation's history, the idea of removing the windows was deeply painful. In all of my preaching, I tried to honor the legitimate concerns of those who wanted to protect the cathedral's fabric while trying to help people see that if we are going to be a "house of prayer for all people" then we need to closely examine anything that might act as a barrier, anything that might hinder our ability to live fully into that identity.

The windows were really a symptom, a symbol of a deeper issue in our country's psyche, and while we spoke to the issue of the windows, our aim was always to point people to the unresolved issues of race and the painful legacy of slavery. I strongly believe that removing the windows was the right decision. However, my aim throughout that process was not only to do the right thing, but also to treat everyone involved with honor and integrity, doing my best to hold the community together.

*Are there lessons you have received from other preachers about preaching in a politically divided age? Is there a time to rock the boat, to create tension among your listeners, or should you always be nonconfrontational?*

*LL:* In a private conversation with the Reverend Peter Gomes, he advised, "Be honest with yourself, Luis. Would you mention Clinton's or Bush's or Obama's name in a sermon if that person were sitting in front of you? If your answer is no, then be honest with yourself and don't mention their names when they are not sitting in front of you."

I attended the Industrial Area Foundation's training for community organizers while in Paterson, New Jersey, and learned from them that every action (think sermon) requires tension. It seems to me that every sermon requires some tension, and that tension can be maintained only for short and focused periods and not for the entire sermon. If the preacher creates tension for a full sermon the listener will shut down and the opportunity for conversion is lost. It is important for the preacher to be aware where he or she will create tension in every sermon.

Tension can be creative and it helps all of us review our lives. The gospel is not there to justify how we lead our lives, it is there to help us examine how we can be better followers of Christ. You want the listener to think, "Of course, why didn't I think of that?" Tension helps raise to a conscious level the knowledge the listener already has. I have always thought that compassion without confrontation is hopelessly sentimental.

*RH:* Proclaiming the gospel is always going to rock the boat. Whether it is on a personal or a political level, the way of Jesus challenges us to be better than we are. What's most critical to me is that I try not to confuse my own strongly held views with the truth of the good news. We live in an age when it has become all too easy to demonize those who disagree with us, to turn them into "the enemy." But Jesus' message is as full of grace as it is full of challenge, and it is always important to give equal voice to God's grace and love. As St. Paul reminds us, we are to speak the truth as we understand it, but we must speak that truth in love.

A mentor of mine once told me that people will never really be able to hear what you have to say in the pulpit if they don't trust that you care about them when you are not preaching. I certainly found that to be true during my years at St. James in Richmond, Virginia. I was able to preach hard things, things that really challenged people, and those sermons could be heard because the members of the church knew that I genuinely cared about them whether or not we agreed on every issue. In the cathedral this is more difficult when 60–75 percent of the people in attendance on a given Sunday morning are visitors. This is why it is so important that the cathedral be radically open and hospitable. We may not always succeed, but we want people to know that in the eyes of God their status as beloved is unconditional.

*What is the role of the biblical texts when addressing political realities? What is the interplay between theology and politics?*

*LL:* If we can all agree that the best sermons are based on the biblical texts, then we can agree that sermons will have an element of surprise that will exceed our experiences or expectations. Another way of saying this is, “Be unpredictable.”

I believe that all preachers let their political leanings dictate how to read the biblical texts. It doesn’t matter if the preacher is liberal or conservative. We let our political leanings color how we read the texts. When the preacher becomes predictable it is like a gathering confirming its own suspicions about God. It is important to hear those with whom we disagree and to read those with whom we disagree. I have always found it instructive to read conservative commentary and to listen to sermons from preachers with a different political leaning than the one I have.

Even better would be to sit in conversation with those with whom we disagree. It will broaden our understanding of who God is and will call forth the gift of empathy we all possess. Preachers cannot let our politics dictate our theological perspectives. Our theology must demand that we examine our politics.

Preaching is all about God’s love and human possibility and if God is love and love is the highest expression of our faith, then we have to ask how love is experienced in the private settings of our lives and how love is expressed in the public spheres of our lives. In the private spheres of our lives love is intimate. Think spousal intimacy. In the public spheres I believe that the highest expression is respect. Respecting those with whom we disagree will make the preacher unpredictable.

*RH:* For me, the biblical texts must be central when addressing political realities. I am a biblical preacher, and everything I have to say about our political life as Americans rises out of the wrestling I do with the texts for a given Sunday. However, as a priest who has spent the majority of his career in the South, I am keenly aware that there were many clergy who used their pulpits in the nineteenth century to defend slavery. They were horribly wrong, but I imagine that they thought they were being biblical preachers. That’s why it is always important for me to remember that if your God looks too much like your political party, then you are confusing politics with the Holy.

The primary biblical themes of God's justice, mercy, love, and forgiveness must always transcend the political realities of the day. The goal of the preacher should be to proclaim the kingdom of God, to be what Eugene Peterson would call the "subversive pastor." We are called not only to critique our way of life as Americans, but also to proclaim a vision for the world as God sees it. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has said more than once, "God came among us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to show us the Way beyond what often can be the nightmare of our own devising and into the dream of God's intending." For me, any preaching that attempts to address current political realities falls short if it does not offer a counter vision of God's dream for the world.

*How have you not lived up to your own ideals for preaching? As you approach the preaching task, do you have a particular prayer, or quote that helps you?*

LL: I have broken every one of the items on my list. I have scolded from the pulpit . . . the preacher's worst sin. I have not done all my homework. I have been predictable. I have failed at creating tension in a sermon. I have let politics determine how I read the biblical texts and I have mentioned a president's name when that president is not attending the worship service knowing that I would not have mentioned their name if they had been in attendance. Preaching is an art form and in all art mistakes are made.

My time as a preacher has led me to pray a paragraph every week written by Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Irony of American History*:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008 [1952]), 63.

*RH:* Every time I step into the pulpit, I feel inadequate to the task in front of me, as if I fall short, that I am not articulate enough, smart enough, faithful enough. As a result, before I preach, I always kneel on the stone steps of the cathedral's Canterbury pulpit and ask God to take my meager words and do something with them.

I truly believe that if anything I preach has meaning for people, it is not because of me but because the Spirit has spoken through my words, using them to touch people in ways that meet them where they are on that Sunday. I cannot tell you the number of times someone has thanked me for something I said in a sermon, only for me then to realize that I never really said what they heard. I have to believe that it is the Spirit who spoke to them, giving them what they needed on that particular day, enabling them to hear what they were capable of hearing at that moment in their lives.