

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost/November 13, 2016

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Wednesday morning, the day after our presidential election, the doors of our church were open as they often are. People came in and out all day to pray and walk the labyrinth. I won't presume to know what they prayed for. One person, however, made it clear. In the early afternoon, a young man came in shirtless and dressed in shorts, with his dog. He approached the altar, looked toward God, said "Fix this mess," kissed the altar and left. It was that kind of day.

Malachi is the last book of the Christian Old Testament because it predicts a herald of the Day of the Lord. We know that person to be John the Baptist who precedes the ministry of Jesus. Malachi is not the name of a prophet. It is a Hebrew word that means "my messenger." Our passage today addresses the arrogant who chase success at the expense of others. Why does God tolerate that? The book of Malachi asserts that such disdain will lead to self-destruction.

Now I am not being partisan here. There is plenty of arrogance to go around. But one of the things that we *do* know about our President-elect is that he will do whatever it takes to win. He is not alone in this. As you know last week I was in Cannon Ball, North Dakota on the Standing Rock Reservation. The Sioux Tribe is facing that same disdain from Energy Transfer, the company that is building an oil pipeline under the Missouri River, a mile from their homes. The pipeline was rejected by the white community of Bismarck 60 miles to the north. The company will do whatever it takes to build the pipeline. There is money to be made.

Arrogance steps upon the vulnerable – Native peoples, African Americans, women, Muslims, gays, Jews, the disabled. There is fear among all

of these people. And others are only too glad to exploit this to arrogantly elevate themselves by putting others down. Again, on Wednesday morning, while people at Saint Paul's were praying, racist and pro-Trump graffiti was discovered spray painted on cars and homes in South Philadelphia. Later that morning, on the window of an empty fur store a swastika, the words "Sieg Heil 2016," and the word "Trump" with the "T" replaced by a swastika, were painted, recalling the same date in 1938 when the anti-Jewish pogroms called *Kristallnacht* took place in Germany. The next day, swastikas, an anti-gay slur, and references to President-elect Donald Trump were found scrawled in bathrooms at a Bucks County high school. On Friday, University of Pennsylvania black students were added to a chat room called the n-word lynching. The word is so vile I won't even use it. The chat room seems to have originated in Oklahoma. Is there any wonder that there is deep fear right now?

Early followers of Jesus understood this fear. They were unprotected in every way. They felt just as at risk or more so as many feel today. Their fear was so unnerving that the only language they felt adequate was of cosmic catastrophe. "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven." Now that's the language of fear.

What to do about fear? Friday, when black students at Penn came under attack, was Veterans' Day. Veterans know what it is to face fear. My cousin-in-law flew helicopters in Viet Nam. For many years he would not talk about it. When he finally did, he mentioned a fellow soldier who while sheltering in a mortar crater countered his fear by placing his trust in God. Everything was out of control. Only God was big enough to uphold his trust. Jesus said to his followers when your fear shakes you to the core, I will give you words and a wisdom. Trust that. Don't let fear paralyze you.

When we are afraid it helps to find a safe place. I was struck on the Standing Rock Reservation that last Sunday, fearing for their water and their way of life, the Dakota Sioux planned a walk of forgiveness. A leader said, "the Lakota call *woakiktunze*, forgiveness but it also isn't saying I forgive you but it's inviting everyone to forgive each other." Mutual forgiveness creates a

safe place where one can think clearly, act constructively, and serve *all* others, whom the Dakota call their relatives. We do the same as Christians when we say the Lord's Prayer. We pray, "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." That's not saying that forgiveness is conditional, it is an invitation into a mutually forgiving community, a safe place. Where do we find such a safe place if we are not a member of a Sioux tribe or an Amish community? You find it in church or other religious congregations of which one may be a part. Saint Paul's is such a place. There are not so many places like this where you can go and be safe in a mutually forgiving community. But here is one place you can find shelter.

The Christian response to arrogance is more than finding trust and safety. It is also one of action. The Second Letter to the Thessalonians renounces living in idleness. Jesus gives us words and a wisdom. We are to speak out against racism when images of lynching are raised, against anti-Semitism when the spectre of Kristallnacht is invoked, against homophobia when gay slurs are scrawled in our schools, against damage to our environment when water and a peoples' livelihood are threatened. We are not to remain silent.

I like to pay attention to young people and listen to what they say. They have a perspective that interests me. One of our twenty-somethings at Saint Paul's who has been with me several summers on the Standing Rock Reservation, at 3 in the morning after watching election returns all night, posted this on Facebook. "At a loss, but here it goes. Democracy is messy... I am concerned for my rights as a woman and a member of the LGBTQ community, and I worry for my black, immigrant, Muslim, friends. But I encourage everyone who feels slighted, afraid, or angry – this is not a time to check out. This is a time to be loud. This country was founded by the people and for the people, so my people, have faith and strength. Don't despair, contribute. Love to you all." Jesus gives us words and a wisdom. This young woman found them. We need to speak up for those who are vulnerable.

We are not to live in idleness. Racism and prejudice, slurs scrawled on walls or painted on cars, is not someone else's problem. As Christians we are called to protect the vulnerable, to contribute to everyone's wellbeing. As the

Dakota say we are everyone's relatives. We are all connected. The way of the cross is to give of ourselves in love for the life of others.

This is not easy. It is difficult. We all know that. So Jesus concludes today's gospel passage by saying, "By your endurance you will gain your souls." Hang in there for what is right. Paul in his Letter to the Romans explains further, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5: 3-5). The Spirit of Christ gives us words and a wisdom. "Do not be weary in doing what is right," it says in Second Thessalonians. Seek the will of God that is the wellbeing of all. Ours is an active hope. It works for the mending of creation, of all that is.

This way of doing and seeking and mending has many twists and turns, kind of like our labyrinth. But stay on the path, keep on walking, the way of hope does not disappoint. It always takes us to the center where everything holds, and we are able to hold onto the unshakeable and outpoured love of God.

Amen.