

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Christ The King

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Our post-election experience has been all too fearful and uncertain. I have not, since I first arrived in the United States as a student been more afraid. This is not because I am afraid of being deported, for I am a citizen. But my fear arises out of the fact that I really cannot tell who my neighbor really is. It appears to me that the past several months has unearthed a kind of strain within the body-politic which we all thought was on the verge of being negated by a new appreciation of the depth of humanity we all share. Many are the reports of overt racism, homophobia, misogyny, xenophobia and Islamophobia that others have perpetrated on other Americans.

One such story that actually got me thinking was about an African American veteran who together with his service dog went to Chili's Restaurant take advantage of the free meals that Chili's was offering to veterans all over the country in appreciation for their service on Veterans Day. This veteran was offered a meal, but as he ate his food, a White patron confronted him about his credentials. The manager was called in to verify whether the man was deserving of the free food. In spite of proving that he was indeed a veteran, the manager took the veteran's food away from the table, leading this man to walk out of the restaurant in shame. I wondered to myself, what in God's name will lead another man to question a man he didn't know about his bonafides and his right to earn free food? And why would the manager even dare to take the food away from the veteran?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said that “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you’ve chosen the side of the oppressor.” People of goodwill do not stay silent, nor do they collude with others in supporting absurdities, they speak up, they protest, they challenge the oppressor. People of goodwill are not necessarily righteous, they recognize their own fallibilities, but the interesting twist is that they challenge what they know to be wrong and what they know offends human decency.

Two thieves hang on the cross on each side of Jesus. These two have been justly punished for their offenses. But of the two, one decides to join others to mock the one who has suffered injustice. But the other thief calls him out on his mockery and affirms their punishment. But he equally rejected the condemnation of Jesus because he knew that Jesus had done nothing to deserve death. He did not take the side of the oppressor, nor did he remain silent. He spoke up, even if his voice carried little to no weight.

I had my own peculiar encounter on Wednesday morning after the elections. Two women who attend a weekly meditation here at St. Paul’s saw me walking down the aisle. They came up to me and asked if I had some words of wisdom to share with them. They were as afraid as I was. I took a step back and responded that the campaign and the elections have revealed a side of our society that I thought was dying out. There are a lot of angry people, I said. And their anger maybe about a system they believe to be unfair.

I shared with them the story about the Wells Fargo incident where associates who earned \$15-\$20 an hour got fired from their jobs because they had been charged by their management to generate more accounts from customers. I am actually a victim of that scheme because they opened an account for me that I didn’t authorize. Well, this whole deal blows up and then the CEO resigns from his position with millions of dollars in payout.

If you are a former employee of Wells Fargo who lost your job and benefits and is presently struggling with finding a job, why would you not be angry? We have cobbled up a system that often denies human worth and work. The same person who comes preaching about the dignity of human life, is the very same person that takes your job from you, takes your mother's job from her and your father's job from him, leaving countless people destitute. How then would you believe or even listen to that same person imploring you to affirm the dignity of the other? How about my own dignity? You scattered the sheep, Jeremiah said. It is you who scattered the sheep, so why complain if you cannot bring them all together again?

A veteran desiring medical care at a VA hospital is put on a waiting list and eventually dies. Meanwhile those whose job it is to ensure that Vets receive care, are busy shuffling papers and collecting bonuses for doing nothing. Why would people not be angry over a system that appears to have subverted the values of human dignity?

A friend once said, it used to be that the crumbs that fell off the rich man's table was enough to guarantee a relatively comfortable middle class life, a decent pension, affordable education for children and a nice vacation. But now, the rich struggle with the middle class over the crumbs that fall off their table.

See, we have a system that rewards a few to the detriment of the whole. A system that rewards profit over common human decency and trades a facade for authenticity. I do not think that all those who voted for the president-elect are racist, homophobes, misogynist or xenophobes, but the fact that they ignored that he said and did, reveals a strain that I am afraid will take a long time to heal.

I went to Face-to-Face with some of our young people yesterday, and in the hall where the clients sit and enjoy their hot meal was a piece of paper taped to the wall. On it was written "Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times if one only remembers to turn on the light."

That shook me a little bit, causing me to wonder if I, like many others, have forgotten to turn on the light that beams in our darkest moments offering the assurance that we need not fear.

No one person or society is immune to those darkest moments, even Jesus himself as the gospel story describes went through some dark moments, but that wasn't enough to stop him from offering salvation to the other thief who also in his darkest moment sought salvation from him. Today, you will be with me in paradise, Jesus assured the thief. For me, it is only the one who is master of eternal harmony that can offer such a gift to a repentant thief who dared to ask-even in his darkest moment.

When we assume that paradise is only a distant place beyond our reach, we give in to a crippling fear that sustains itself only by its ability to delegitimize the humanity of another. But if we are to embrace the idea that we can achieve harmony within our lives and beyond ourselves, we would have begun the process of recognizing each other as a gift to each one of us.

My message to the ladies that Wednesday morning was, democracy is often messy, and we cannot do anything about the results of the election, but one thing we can do is to pray for him. We pray for each other and ourselves because we know that prayer changes lives. We pray for each other and ourselves because we know that the Jesus who promises paradise to a repentant thief, also answers prayers. We pray for each other and ourselves because we know that we collectively depend on one God and one King.

I learned many years ago that there are two languages, two motives, two feelings, two activities, two actions, two ideas: love and fear. And the gateway to freedom is in choosing love over fear. And so my friend, do not fear, do not be afraid, be ye still and know that the God who comes to us, often unbidden, is and will always be our refuge and strength.

And it is out of the store of his abundance, does He nudge us to choose love over fear, mainly because that's what He's taught us. Maybe, it's about time we turn on the light. Amen.