

Sermons at St Paul's

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

In the great religions of the world, and especially among people who call themselves the spiritual descendants of Abraham -- Jew, Christian and Muslim -- there is a clear understanding that God is good. No one has ever figured out, then, why there is evil also in our world. We have various theories, of course. It was Lucifer's pride; it was Adam and Eve's disobedience; it was the collective sins of humans that separated us from our good Creator. And we all agree that we want desperately to return to a state of perfection and grace, at one with God's goodness. But there are demons, and evil, and wickedness that keep tearing us away from that desired goal.

A week ago, a very sick and angry man walked into a nightclub called Pulse in Orlando, and began killing. News reports are still coming in, trying to figure out why he did such a thing. And at every new revelation, some other sensitivity has been uncovered. He announced connections with a series of terroristic organizations; he seems to have had very conflicted gender relationships; the people killed there were predominantly young and Hispanic; and he had been on a couple of FBI watch lists. Our hearts cry out: Why, Lord? Why does this kind of horror occur in our world? And what shall we, as Christians, do?

The problem of evil surely is as old as humans. Archaeologists have found evidence of intra-species violence going back millennia. The Old Testament is rife with stories of warfare, violence and sin. Abraham himself sinned, and we his spiritual descendants are all too capable of following in his footsteps. Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael all remind us that humans are flawed creatures. Without the redeeming grace of God, we cannot hope for peace, justice or mercy. No wonder the ancient Scriptures try to spell out what humans must not do, for fear of committing sins that will divide us from God's love!

And yet, as Paul points out in the letter to the Galatians, Jesus came among us to set us free from the wracking guilt and pain of slavery to sin. He writes:

“...in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Jesus Christ. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

You can say to me: This is all too theoretical! What about Orlando? What about Colorado, Charleston, Boston and Connecticut? What of the now hundreds of innocent people who have been killed by mentally ill, gun-toting, radicalized young men in this country and Europe? And my answer must be: Jesus died on the Empire’s cross for us, so that we would have the courage and vision of the power of Love to destroy evil. He died to prevent the sick guilt and fear that leads to scapegoating and sacrifice. He died and then rose, so we could see and cling to his Resurrection’s promise: Love will win.

Do not make any mistake: there are still plenty of demons and devils that are ready to swarm into any mind not actively pledged to God. Heaven knows that they have assaulted even the greatest of our saints with temptations and promises. The story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness tells us that no one is immune. And it also tells us that no one who clings to God and God’s love will fail to find aid against them.

Our gospel story today gives us some very good insights into the evils of Jesus’ day. A man in what would now be northwestern Syria meets Jesus. He is said to be possessed by demons. Today, we would probably describe him as mentally ill and tormented by hallucinations and compulsions. But even if the language is old, the demons that drive him out of the city and into the tombs, to rip off his clothes and fight if anyone tries to restrain him, evoke some of the saddest stories of human mental illness. Call them demons or delusions; they are heart-breaking in their ability to separate some humans from the society of those who would care for them. Just ask the workers from Project Home who try to bring in the homeless mentally-ill street people!

As Jesus tried to cure that man, the demonic forces within him said something very revealing about evil: “They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.” You see, demons and devils and all the other names we have for evil, are highly

infectious. If they are driven out of one person, they happily move into many who surround him.

So after the killings in Orlando and other places recently, it is not surprising that the internet and media were full of hate-speech and threats to those who had any connection whatever with the shooter **or** the dead. Push every sensitive button, and more and more people will be fixated by cries for vengeance, for demonizing racial, gender, religious and other groups. Can you see how evil moves? Demand the sacrificing or scapegoating of any group by naming it “evil” and evil infects people like a virus. This is spiritual Zika.

If it gets more virulent, and if we do not turn to God and stand with each other in solidarity and faith, demanding both justice and love, it can mutate into spiritual Ebola. The Holocaust was spiritual Ebola. Like Ebola, it took a World Health effort to eradicate, and we must be ever-vigilant lest it try to return.

Let us, dear friends in Christ, be strong in our faith in a world that needs our witness and our prayers. We must stand with Jesus, on the Resurrection side of the cross, where there is “no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female.” Here at St. Paul’s and in this city, in the Delaware Valley and everywhere we go, we must carry our baptismal promise “**to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being**” like the banner that it is.

Today Cliff has invited us to join him at 4 pm to walk the labyrinth in solidarity with all those who have suffered as a result of Orlando. I do not need to name all the groups of people who have been threatened with spiritual Zika. You know them. Name them in your prayers! If you can come, please do, and pray as you enter the labyrinth that you will be freed from demonizing any of them. And pray as you leave the labyrinth that God will fill your heart with courage to love, to witness for truth, and to act in faith in Jesus’ power to overcome evil.

After the man was healed from his illness, he begged that he might stay with Jesus; “but Jesus sent him away, saying, “***return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.***” Today, after you receive Jesus’ food for your soul in his body and blood, return home, and declare how much Jesus has done for you. You are healed, too. *Amen.*