

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/June 28, 2015

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The Wisdom of Solomon gives us a vision of what our life together should look like. “God created us for incorruption,” it says, “and made us in the image of his own eternity,” that is, in the image of his love that has no beginning or end. To have the funeral of Clementa Pinckney a victim of hate, and the supreme court decision in favor of love on the same day, Friday, offered such a clear vision of what our life together should *not* look like and what it should. “God did not make death,” Wisdom teaches us, “and (God) does not delight in the death of the living.” Instead, God has set before us the vision of a world uncorrupted by violence and hatred. There is diversity and difference, and the promise of benefitting from our shared life together if we can live into the love for which God created us.

Sometimes we get the difference but forget the love. We live alongside one another, but with identities that are kept separate by divisive social media, uncompromising politics, well-funded lobbying groups, among other factors. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman laments that people of different identities live next to one another, “but they seldom talk to each other, and if they do they tend to use the barrel of a gun for a telephone.” That phrase haunted me this week. We need to pick up the telephone, at least figuratively. The gun is an instrument of control. The telephone is a device for listening to the other who is different, for being generous with them and with ourselves.

There are some Bible lessons that guide us to that incorruptible community that is God's vision for our life together. First, when we give and forgive, it is disarming. Second, listen (long distance if need be) to the voice of

the other. Love, even when it seems it won't do any good. And finally, we are all in it together.

Paul presents us with the Macedonians and the Judeans. The Judeans are privileged by their status as Jews. The Macedonians are Gentile, a different race. They experience persecution and prejudice. They are “down to the bottom” poor. Privilege is always in relation to others. The fortune of one is connected to another's misfortune. The Judeans were part of this social pattern even if they didn't feel particularly privileged. In fact, they were facing dire financial need. Paul advises that the way to break down barriers of privilege and prejudice is through a love that is generous. It is not an easy love. It is a love that follows Jesus as an example. When we give, when we forgive, we chip away at the walls that divide us. It is disarming.

The Gospel tells the story of Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He is a privileged member of the Jewish ruling class. Jairus' daughter is at the point of death and he believes that Jesus has the power to make her well. Jairus does not stand upon his privileged position but gives it up to ask, listen, out of love for his daughter. Giving up privilege is as disarming as it is unusual.

He is about to receive another lesson. This errand of mercy is interrupted by a woman of no social standing. The contrast is stark. Like the Judeans, the fortune of the privileged is joined to the misfortune of the disadvantaged. Jairus hasn't had to do anything wrong for this to be. He is simply living in a world corrupted by envy and inequality as the Book of Wisdom suggests. Instead of race, now the distinction is sexual identity.

The woman fell into abject poverty seeking treatment for persistent, painful hemorrhaging. The only thing she had left to give up was her place. Knowing that a conversation would be unthinkable (It was against the custom of the time for a Jewish religious teacher to be speaking with a woman in public.) she bravely stepped forward believing that if she could only touch Jesus' cloak she would be made well. Jesus felt energy drain from him, and asked who touched his clothes. Her touch breached the barrier of male

privilege, and when Jesus asked who had done this she was afraid. Jesus saw her, listened to her, and said to her, “Daughter your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed...” Jesus listened to the voice of the other, across the distance of sexual identity and social custom.

During this delay word reaches Jairus that his daughter has died. One might have expected Jairus to be angry at Jesus for stopping or at the woman for this interruption. But he is not. It seems we are all in trouble together. Or looked at from the other side, if one is not healed all are not healed. If one is not free all are not free. It is a new way of envisioning what an incorruptible life might look like.

Jesus says to the disconsolate father, “Do not fear, only believe.” Is it possible that love could be stronger than death? Some laughed. Jesus said, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” His words crackle with resurrection energy, and the little girl got up. We are to love even when it seems it won’t do any good. Will our small acts of kindness make a difference? Jesus tells us that we are capable of adding to the change needed for the world of incorruption that Wisdom envisions. What we do may seem laughably small. I remember years ago after a wind storm it was reported that fewer trees fell because many had already shed their leaves. What struck me was that something as small as a leaf can make the difference between a tree standing or falling. All that is needed is many together. Our deeds taken together and over time can make quite a difference. We may not be around to see it, but we are surely capable of adding to the change needed for a more loving world.

150 years ago our rector at Saint Paul’s was awakened in the middle of the night with the news that Robert E. Lee had furled his battle flag and surrendered at Appomattox Court House. The rector rushed out of the house and rang the little bell that still stands at the top of our parish house. It remains a symbol of peace and love to this day. The Confederate battle flag reappeared at the State Houses in South Carolina, Alabama, and elsewhere in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. Nine African Americans who had gathered for Bible study and prayer at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston were killed a

week and a half ago. The grieving loved ones forgave the alleged killer and it was disarming. The Governor of Alabama has removed the flag, and the Governor of South Carolina has called for its removal. They have listened to the voice of the other, the subjugated, and lifted one of the weights that had held them down.

The Bible teaches that we are all in it together. Marriage is the creation of community. Marriage is less than what it is meant to be when that form of community is exclusive. Wisdom's vision of what life together should look like includes every race and sexual orientation. Justice Anthony Kennedy in his opinion for the majority of the Supreme Court wrote that "marriage embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. It would misunderstand these men and women (who are gay) to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right." The Episcopal Church, based on God's vision of what our life together should look like, has also granted that right.

"God created us for incorruption," Wisdom tells us, "and made us in the image of his own eternity," that love which knows no end. There is diversity and difference in what our Assistant Emmanuel has called an "all-embracing society." It is for us with God's help to create a path to this end. We want to be aware of the connection between privilege and disadvantage. We need to listen to the voice of the other, and when they have been silenced we need to feel their touch. To give and forgive is disarming. It brings us together. Finally, act in love even when it seems foolish. Remember a leaf can make the difference as to whether a tree stands or falls. We are all in it together. As we pray, "Grant us, Almighty God, so to be joined together in unity of spirit by the prophets and apostles' teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you."

Amen.