

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 22-A (4 Oct 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2020-10-03 Sat 12:43>*

## **Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20, Psalm 19, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46*

## **1 Changing Sermons**

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus does something that only Jesus would do. He takes a challenge to his authority and he turns it into an invitation to hear the cry of people who are hurting. He points away from himself and toward those whose pain requires attention and redress.

My text for today's sermon got changed out from under me this week. There was a verbal traffic-accident, and I just couldn't look away. I couldn't look away because there were people I love who were hurt by that accident. And I was left asking, what is my responsibility here? I serve a multi-ethnic parish where fully a quarter of our members are persons of color. What does it mean for me to love my parish today?

The accident I'm referring to happened at the presidential debate Tuesday night. To hear **anyone** explicitly invited to disavow white supremacy – and then to refuse to do so – was shocking.

Now here's the thing about shocking. There's been a lot in our national discourse that has been shocking. I'll let you choose your own examples. But the increasingly open expressions of racism, which once tried to hide behind technical terms and plausible deniability, have been especially difficult. Because words have power. Words hurt. Words create danger for bodies and for souls. Bloodshed and cries for mercy are not just metaphors from the Old Testament. And just because some words aren't about me specifically doesn't mean they don't matter to me. Words that hurt my neighbor are words that hurt me.

If we've learned nothing else from Covid, we've learned that, haven't we? What affects my neighbor affects me, too. Every life is connected. Covid gives us a vivid, physical illustration of the words the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote to his white colleagues from the Birmingham Jail: *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*

So when I hear words that devalue the life of my sister or brother, those words cheapen my life as well. So I must look at Jesus and wonder how to follow his lead into really hearing the cry of my neighbor.

## 2 Divisive Words

Often when the topic of race comes up, some of us get defensive. Some of us think any mention of race is political or divisive. Our reflex is to turn away. Some of us think that such topics are better left unaddressed.

I've thought that sometimes, too. In fact, Becky and I raised our children that way. We never explicitly told them, but we carefully taught them by example that whenever we described someone we'd seen, we would never, ever, use the words "black" or "white" or "brown." We wanted to at least act as if we were color-blind; we wanted our children to act as if they were color-blind. We thought that was the most loving thing to do. And our children learned that from us.

So sad, then, that what we taught them, with the best of intentions, was so wrong. Jesus didn't say it was silence, but the truth that would set us free. The truth is that words like "black" and "white" and "brown" remain operative in our society. Those words have meaning. And to deny that meaning is to sweep those words under the carpet, to give myself permission to ignore them, and to deny the experiences of people who simply can't ignore them. People whose lives are **shaped** by the meanings of those words. It is also to deny and leave myself vulnerable to the powerful and corrosive effect of those words on my own soul – even when they operate in my favor.

It turns out my efforts were aimed at teaching my children silence rather than compassion. My example demonstrated how to look away rather than express solidarity. I modeled avoiding discomfort instead of taking up my cross and following Jesus. I taught my children to ignore the pain of others instead of listening to their neighbors' cry.

Thanks be to God, I'm not the only influence in my children's lives. They are growing up in the church. They hear the Gospel read and preached, they feel their bodies carried through the motions and the meanings of our liturgies. They have participated in other organizations connected to our faith that also taught them how to build up tolerance for discomfort, to be able to listen to the cry of those in pain, and to be in solidarity with their neighbors. They have learned deeper truths than I could express with words, and they have shown me that God is at work in them.

So it is for the love of Christ and the love of my neighbor, that sometimes I have to say uncomfortable things. I find it necessary to say, when others delay and beat around the bush, that white supremacy is wrong. I find it necessary to acknowledge that our world is filled with injustice. And as a follower of the Prince of Peace, I have to insist that violence, whether by provocateurs or by the government, is never a helpful response. Something else is called for.

### 3 Hearing the Cry

When the people of Israel were enslaved under a racist regime in Egypt and cried out, God heard their cry and responded. God got involved and become vulnerable to all kinds of heartache as a result. When we, sisters and brothers, were enslaved by sin that so easily entangles and cried out, Jesus heard our cry and responded. Jesus got involved even to the point of bearing the punishment that we, and not he, deserved. If the followers of this God of solidarity are not going to hear the cry of our neighbors who are in pain, then who is?

But, we ask, how do we do that? How can we hear these cries so full of pain that they threaten our own equilibrium, threaten the tentative peace that we have made with the world as it is? How can we make St. Thomas' a safe place to talk about the things that are really important, really personal, the things that touch our lives in the deep and tender places? And when we disagree, how do we hold our differences in a creative, caring tension?

As Christians, as followers of Jesus, and as Episcopalians in particular, we begin that work in our practice of worship. We pray. We make confession, crying out for our own sins, in thought and word and deed, things done and things left undone. We cry out for our failure to love our neighbor as ourselves, to hear our neighbor's anguish and to respond to our neighbor's pain. Then with that work of confession never fully completed, but at least keeping us honest, then we receive God's forgiveness, we offer peace to one another, and we share the body and blood of our Lord, one bread and one cup. In words and sacraments we listen to the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and we are changed. Then our Deacon sends us forth to carry that change with us out into the world. We enact that change in our thoughts, words, and deeds during the rest of the week.

### 4 Conclusion

Jesus was frustrated with the religious people because they weren't willing to do the difficult work of hearing and responding to the cries of their neighbors. So Jesus told them the story of a vineyard, drawing their minds to a Bible story they knew well from the prophet Isaiah.<sup>1</sup> Isaiah's version ends like this:

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts  
is the house of Israel,  
and the people of Judah  
are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice,  
but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness,  
but heard a cry!

When God faced the world in hope and expectation, God didn't find what God had hoped. So God listened and God entered into the pain of God's creation in the person of Jesus, God spoke the Beatitudes and the parables, God cleansed the Temple, and God died on the cross.

Our job, Christians, is to listen to our neighbors as God listens. To hear with compassion. To talk about what's really going on in the world, and not just to us. To act in ways that promote justice. To see the cross of Christ before us, and to share in its burden. Because that is precisely the path to resurrection and eternal life.

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<sup>1</sup>Isa 5.7 NRSV