

A Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost – September 6, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

by David H. Knight, Interim Rector

Send us your spirit, God, to open our hearts and minds to your word, and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus' name. Amen.

*"Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity
and the rod of anger will fail.*

Proverbs 22:8

Our first reading this morning from Proverbs comes from what is known as Wisdom literature in the Bible. Biblical wisdom is concerned not only with the moral character of the individual, but also with the establishment of a wise community with its roots in the peace and justice of God. Biblical wisdom speaks to what is beneficial to the larger social order. The lesson we have heard this morning reminds us that our personal lives and our personal faith as God's people cannot be separated from the larger social fabric of the world. Stephen Johnson, a professor of preaching at Abilene Christian University puts it this way when he says, "To preach biblical wisdom material will require the preacher to resist preaching these texts as simple moralisms and rather work at the intersection of the theological claim they make and the world in which we live and move." To put it another way, it is important that we understand as best we can how the bible readings for the day speak to the situations we face. These include matters of justice that we as the people of God are called to address from a faith perspective.

My sisters and brothers, the slaying of Alison Parker and Adam Ward, two young television journalists in Roanoke on August 26 as they were broadcasting live to a television audience, is still seared on our screens and in our minds. Just on Friday,

I was talking with Dee Mason, daughter of our own Freeman Mason, a member of this parish. She lives in Roanoke. I was telling her that the people in Roanoke are so much in our prayers. She said, “David, this community is in grief.” She told me how Alison and Adam were so much a part of the community. As TV news journalists, they were in everybody’s homes every morning. Now they are gone and their voices are silenced. The community is struggling. The staff and producers of Station WBDJ7 are struggling as they continue to work. Alison and Adam, two young people who had such bright futures were just doing their jobs and they weren’t even in a war zone. They were in a water park.

We witness all too often killings by people wielding guns. We witness the ambush of policemen in their line of duty, men and women who every day risk their lives to serve and protect the public. I often think of Germaine Alley, an Henrico Police officer who is one of those policemen who faces risk every day in the line of duty. Some of you know him. On the night of January 30, 1997, Officer Alley tried to apprehend the two gunmen who had just shot our son, Jamie. He was off duty but recognized the description of their getaway car and gave pursuit. When he approached the driver’s side window, the gunmen sped away but were later apprehended. They could just as easily shot and killed Officer Alley too.

The latest figures report that every day in America, 90 people are killed by gun violence including many whose killings do not make headlines. This is an increase over any previous year. That is on the average, one soul every 16 minutes. For the ones that make the news there is always a flourish of outrage for the few days of the news cycle but then the incident is virtually forgotten—forgotten except by those who have lost a loved one—they never forget. They live with the loss every day.

James Atwood, a Presbyterian minister who has served parishes here in Virginia and who has worked for over 35 years with efforts to reduce gun violence has written a book, America and Its Guns, a Theological Expose. He traces the origin and perpetuation of this national disgrace yet speaks of the hope that there is to come when people of faith do not give up. Yes, Atwood says, there are political dimensions whenever guns are discussed, but what happens in society *because of*

guns makes them a profound spiritual concern that must be dealt with by people of faith. Although one cannot dismiss the political implications of guns, the spiritual implications far outweigh the purely political. Jim Atwood points out that the millions of Americans who have died at the barrel of a gun demand that the subject be examined in God's house. Human beings made in the image of God are slaughtered while every denomination in the country affirms that people are the 'crown of creation.' Every soul gunned down is a creature of God. Every soul gunned down is our neighbor. Every soul gunned down is a child of God created in God's image. Nothing is more sacred than the life of a human being. Each human body is the 'temple of the living God' (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Nothing—nothing—is more spiritual than that. We must not be afraid to have conversations about such spiritual matters like this in God's house.

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Let us not forget the promise that you and I made at our baptism, a promise we continue to make whenever we renew our baptismal vows when we are asked, "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" If gun violence is not evil, then what *is* it? If gun violence does not corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, then what *does* it do? If you and I do not renounce these evil powers as you and I are asked to do, then what *are* we doing?

Can you and I as modern Christians excuse ourselves and bear any less social responsibility when our cities and towns and rural areas are defiled by innumerable murders? Can anyone who takes seriously God's word be witness to our mass shootings and still say, "We shouldn't talk about it in God's house?" If God, as Jesus told us, cares about a sparrow's death, preventing the death of any of God's children becomes an urgent matter. It is a spiritual matter. Our faith in God's eventual victory compels us to work for that day foreseen by the prophet when 'Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets each with staff in hand, and the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets. And none shall make them afraid.'" (Zechariah 8:4-5)

Jim Atwood reminds us that “Scripture and experience tell us that those who are armed to the teeth cannot build a peaceful society; neither can sentimental people who are satisfied with a ‘little bit of togetherness,’ shape Jesus peaceable kingdom. Only strong lovers can build a peaceful society. That’s the way God designed the world and why Jesus called peacemakers ‘the children of God’” as we hear in the gospel of Matthew.

Now, as I stand here before you this morning, I am keenly aware that there are many different views on the matter of gun violence. For many on both sides it is a sensitive subject. It must be said that the vast majority of gun owners are responsible non violent citizens. It’s not about taking guns away from hunters who obey the law. I am also aware that what is said from any pulpit can be heard by some of the faithful as one sided. That is not my intention. Rather, if what I have said in any way can provide a basis for further conversations among us, that could be a good thing. How can we, in the lap of God’s love begin to have thoughtful and fruitful conversations in which we can respect one another and work together for a solution that will reduce gun violence?

Last Sunday at our adult forum we heard the sermon preached last month in Hayneville, Alabama by the Right Reverend Michael Curry, our presiding bishop-elect. His words are still etched in my memory when he said, “Jesus did not come to earth to establish and institution. He came to start a movement and the church must carry out that movement.” He spoke of matters of justice that call us to keep on, to keep on when faced with difficulty, to keep on when faced with adversity, to keep on in the face of evil threats, to keep on. That is the mission of the church. Then, only days later, as the words of Michael Curry were still ringing in my ears, I read an op-ed article in the [Washington Post](#) written by Andy Parker, the father of Alison Parker. He writes about the weekend before Alison was shot on live television.

“The weekend before she died, Alison was rafting on the Nantahala River in North Carolina with her mother, her boyfriend, Chris, her close friend Katy, and me. It was her favorite place on earth. She was a brilliant Kayaker and it was a family tradition she relished. We told each other often the mantra all paddlers must keep

in mind while fighting the forces of rapid water: 'Never stop paddling. You just have to paddle through the rapids. You just have to paddle through.'" Alison's father concluded his article, "Whatever it takes." (Washington Post, August 30, 2015)

As God's people, as God's church, called to be faithful to God's word, we too must keep on fighting the rapid forces of the waters of injustice which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. We must keep on. *"Never stop paddling. You just have to paddle through the rapids. You just have to paddle through."*

Send us your spirit, God, to open our hearts and minds to your word, and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus' name. Amen.