

A Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent – March 22, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

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Challenging a Culture of Violence

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

"Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John 12:31-32

Today's gospel draws our focus to what Jesus' crucifixion means for the church that would come to bear his name. The Gospel of John calls us not only into a deeper understanding of the cross, but also a deeper understanding of the church's mission to strive for an alternative way of life in a violent world. In today's gospel, we see the momentum toward Jesus' crucifixion building and all eyes are focused on him. People were coming from all over. Some wanted to hear him. Others were plotting to destroy him. There was division among the disciples. Some of them were becoming more faithful while among them was one who was about to betray him. The crowds came to Philip and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip then hurried over to Andrew. Then Philip and Andrew went and told Jesus about all those who wanted to see him. One more time, Jesus looked out over them and tried to tell them what his mission really was. Central to Jesus' mission was then—and is now—that of challenging a culture of violence whatever its form may be.

"The hour has come," Jesus says. It would be the hour toward which his whole life and ministry had been leading. And as that hour approaches, Jesus also tells them, "Now my soul is troubled, and what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I

have come to this hour.” This passage in John’s gospel makes it clear that the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is the first step in God’s action to reconcile humanity to God. God who became human in the person of Jesus will cause an action of ultimate love by dying on the cross of human existence. It is the church’s mission to proclaim the message of this gift to this broken world.

Jesus said to those gathered before him, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” In his gospel, John’s understanding of the work of the cross is concerned with the sins of the forces in the world that operate in opposition to God’s purposes. These are the forces that exist in structures and institutions that shape human lives and seek to hold human beings captive to its ways. Throughout the ages, such institutions or systems as we might call them, have always existed. As he was approaching his own crucifixion, Jesus publicly and dramatically proclaimed judgment upon these systems in the world that work against God’s purposes. He exposed them for what they were. Of course, it led these forces to nail Jesus to the cross, but as it would come to pass, the power of God would become manifest in a church whenever the church would be faithful to its call to strive for justice and to renounce the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

For us in our time, we must always be asking, “What are the forces in our culture that hold us captive and take us down the path that leads to the diminishing of human life?” The age old question arises for the church and it is, “What are the implications for the church if it is to be faithful to its call to proclaim the gospel?” We might want to say, “Father save the church from this hour.” But no, it is for this reason that we have come to this hour to renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Of the forces that have held us captive there are those in which violence in one form or another has diminished human life as well as God’s creation itself. There is violence against the environment. There is violence against human beings that takes many forms. There are systems that support that violence. It is against these kinds of powers that be that Jesus is confronting as he faces the cross and as calls us to follow him. In so doing, he calls to follow his example of a nonviolent response as the only way to confront violence.

The late Walter Wink, a contemporary biblical scholar and theologian who has written about Gospel nonviolence, speaks about the invisible forces that determine human existence. He has suggested that the “myth of redemptive violence” is prevalent in our time. According to this myth, the way to bring order out of chaos is through violently defeating “the other.” The way to deal with threats from enemies is by violently eliminating them. We see this taking place everywhere in our culture. Some ways are subtle, yet others are not so subtle. Recently, for example, as Jeannie and I were coming out from a movie theatre we saw young children at video machines in the lobby of the theatre playing violent video games. These video games are training our children that violence is not only entertaining but it is acceptable. More seriously, we see this myth being played out in our nation’s tenacious hold on the death penalty. The United States remains the only civilized nation on the planet that still utilizes the death penalty. We see this dynamic in acts of terrorism and in our response to terrorism. In the face of all this, the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., come to mind when he said, “Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars.” We see this myth played out in the gun violence that plagues this nation and in the political climate that makes it so difficult even to begin to address the matter of gun violence in any meaningful way. We see this myth played out in the racism that rears its ugly head. Despite all the progress that has been made over the generations, we still have a long way to go especially as we witness recent events in so many places.

Where is the church’s voice in confronting this myth that we must meet violence with violence? We will do well to remember that at the General Convention of 1958, the Episcopal Church adopted its stand in opposition to the death penalty and has reaffirmed that position on many occasions since as has the Diocese of Virginia as well.

Another matter about which the voice of the church is being heard is from a group called “Bishops against Gun Violence.” Following the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, the bishops of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut initiated a movement to address the scourge of gun violence in this nation. They have been joined by approximately 60 other bishops. Two years ago during Holy Week there was a service in our nation’s capitol. It took the form of a

service modeled after The Way of the Cross. It was sponsored by the bishops of Connecticut who were joined by Episcopal bishops, priests and laity from across the nation. Our own Bishop Johnston was among the bishops. I remember that day well. It was a cold, raw, with snow that turned to sleet. The weather fit the mood of the occasion as we processed from St. John's Church, Lafayette Square through twelve stations along the way where prayers were held for the victims of gun violence. The procession ended at the U.S. Capitol Building. The Rev. Kathie Adams Shepherd, rector of Trinity Church in Newtown Connecticut said of this effort to confront the tragedy of gun violence, "The Gospel calls us to carry a cross of hope and peace, and to care deeply for every human life—the lives of people we know personally and the lives of those we may never meet. We are called not to wash our hands of the violence of this world but to raise our hands and our voices tirelessly in protest against it. We are called to claim every life as worthy of our efforts to ensure that every single one of God's children is safe, whole, loved, and living a life of peace. We must see in life the very life and breath of God."

Today's words in the Gospel are clear. Jesus said, "Now is the judgment of this world: now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." What he is saying is that the systems of this world which diminish humanity must be confronted. And the power of God is manifest in the church when the church is faithful to its call to renounce the evil forces of this world.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent campaigns give testimony and witness to the validity of Jesus' work. When the "powers that be" turned the hoses and dogs on the marchers the images were broadcasted across the nation and world on television. The reality of racism was graphically and publicly exposed for all to see. Once exposed, the spirit of racism began to lose some of its power over people. In our day, what is happening in Ferguson and in other cities continues to expose the vestiges of racism that still exist in our nation to this day.

As we continue to confront the violence of racism, Bishop Johnston, in his pastoral address at Annual Council announced a new racial reconciliation initiative that will begin this year to help us here in the diocese to be facilitators of reconciliation both within our own walls and in the larger community. There will be a series of listening sessions around the diocese.

We have been asked, and will be hosting the first one of these listening sessions here at Epiphany on Thursday, April 16 from 7-8:30 p.m. Another will be held at Trinity in Fredericksburg and then one at the Falls Church in Falls Church. These sessions will follow the format for listening that was so helpful when used a few years ago to address tensions and divisions regarding the church's ministry in matter of human sexuality. I commend this event to you as I think this listening session will be very helpful to us all.

The crucified Jesus draws us as his followers to himself. As we approach Holy week, let us listen once again to Jesus' words as he faced the cross, "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Let us never forget that the power of God is manifest in the church when it is faithful to its call to renounce the evil forces of this world. May God grant us the strength and the courage more and more to be the church that Jesus calls us to be. *Amen.*