

Sermon Proper 9 - July 5, 2015

Cathedral of the Incarnation

I found it interesting that I was asked to preach on this Sunday following July 4. As an Australian we are not quite as independent as Americans. The Queen of England remains the Queen of Australia. However I went to the heart of what independence means and I started my preparation by digging into the Declaration of Independence. I reflected on what it meant, and especially the ideals that it contained for the new country. I started to think about a people's idealism born out of conflict. Who could go past the ideal that "we are all created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

So much has been happening though in the world, in the nation and in our church in these past few weeks. Any one event was an opportunity for preaching. However after sitting with the texts for a time, and after reflecting on those words from the Declaration of Independence, the immense shadow of the events at Mother Emanuel church in Charleston a few weeks ago was all over me, a shadow so dark it stained my conscience, and the conscience of this nation.

The shadow added to the shadows from Sandy Hook Elementary School, the Century 16 movie theatre in Aurora, Colorado and the West Nickel Mine School in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. These shadows hang in our conscience especially I think because the perpetrators were not the usual enemies of the United States, rather they were young white men unable to unburden themselves of their anger and frustration in healthy ways. They certainly did not hold these independence ideals close to their hearts. Life and liberty was denied to the families they impacted.

As I contemplated the presence of these dark shadows it was the hope that flowed from the lips of the families of those that died in Charleston that really touched me. The bail hearing for Dylann Roof was filled with extraordinary statements. First the judge encouraged everyone to see the victims on both sides of the tragedy – the church community and the family of Dylann Roof. Then the families began to address Dylann himself. The pain and grief was evident in their voices but it was their words of forgiveness that hung in the silent air. "I forgive you" said Ethel Lance's daughter. "It hurts me, it hurts a lot of people but God forgive you and I forgive you." "I forgive you and my family forgives you," said Myra Thompson's son Anthony. And on they went.

Forgiveness flowed from the lips of these Christian witnesses, living out the prophetic gospel call made of all of us. Surely one of the hardest things to do, but what an example for all the world to see. None of us know how we'd react in similar circumstances, but for me I'd hope I could find that same forgiveness if my sister or brother, or niece or nephew were similarly taken. I hope I would not think about what to say but that the words of forgiveness would flow

Sermon Proper 9 - July 5, 2015

Cathedral of the Incarnation

from my heart and from my lips, like the words of Jesus up on that cross – “Forgive them Father for they know not what they are doing”. These were prophetic words that resonated around the world, and continue to resonate in our world today. Right here in this building this morning, they still resonate.

Ezekiel’s words also resonated in the ancient world as a prophet of God. He was commanded by God to leave his exiled community in Babylon and go back to the heartless and wayward people of Israel. Hardly the most inviting of commissions would you say! God knew that just sending Ezekiel to Israel would cause them to stop and reflect. “Whether they hear, or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.” They shall KNOW! The mere physical presence of Ezekiel was enough to get their attention. Some would hear and some would not hear, but they would all know that someone special had been in their presence.

“I forgive you ...” said Ethel Lance’s daughter.

This thread of prophetic witness can also be found in our second reading for today. Paul had his own unique presence in the years after Jesus’ death. Before his encounter with Jesus’ spirit though he was a well-known and feared persecutor of the followers of the Way. But he was changed by his encounter with Jesus.

In today’s Epistle he tells the Corinthians of an experience of heaven that he’d heard of, but which we understand to be his own experience of the Holy Spirit. He thinks that he should boast of this encounter but feels that humility is best, focusing on reminding the Corinthians of his weaknesses, of the thorn in his side that causes him pain. Enough pain that he prays God will remove it from him. His feelings overcame his thinking.

Paul I feel gets it. He doesn’t want people to experience him as he once was - a boaster and a person who overwhelms people. Rather Paul wants people to see him as he is now in all his weakness, still faithfully proclaiming God’s love for him and for others. Paul’s thorn is a constant reminder for him, and by extension for us all, of our fragility and our vulnerability as humans. A pain that keeps us grounded in our faith.

“Every fibre in my body hurts, and I will never be the same ...” said Tywanza Sanders’ mother.

Faith hurts, but our example of forgiveness and the example of people like Felecia Sanders, is the prophetic witness God calls us to be. Faith hurts but hate destroys and hate is so very corrosive to the soul.

Sermon Proper 9 - July 5, 2015

Cathedral of the Incarnation

In today's gospel Jesus tells us more about the prophetic life. It is a life of honor he says, except in one's hometown. The prophets of the bible all tended to be sent from their hometowns to areas of need. It was something that resonated with me too as I felt called here to this country. Maybe in one's hometown the familiarity with the person causes assumptions to be made about them. Maybe it causes us to discount their new spiritual awakening and their lived example.

Jesus certainly was amazed at the unbelief and seeming lack of faith of those in his hometown. It is almost like when we become followers of Jesus we are challenged by those closest to us. Challenged because we change when we adopt the ideal to love God and our neighbor, forgive others and work toward making life better for our communities. If we move away and start living in a new community as people of faith, then that is how we are known, that is how we are seen and experienced. This is prophetic witness.

The apostles were sent out in pairs to touch the lives of communities far and wide, away from their homes, from the places they were known. They were to be fully reliant on the generosity of those who they met. They were to be prophets through their presence, by their words and actions. Their lives depended on it.

Like Ezekiel's presence in Israel, these apostles of Jesus would have made lasting impressions on the communities they visited, whether people had ears to hear them or not. They carried with them a responsibility to bring to these communities the message and actions of love, justice and God's holy presence.

This past week the Episcopal Church has taken significant steps to recognize marriage equality. Many people, and churches within the Anglican Communion look suspiciously upon the Episcopal Church and accuse it of failing to uphold the biblical teachings on marriage. The way I see this is that the United States is the vanguard of social evolution. I feel social changes only evolve in times of relative peace. The Church has to respond to the evolution of social change by drawing on the principles Jesus taught us that are clear within the bible. Justice, love, and forgiveness all fed into the debate about this change in how we see marriage.

Now that it is done, so the Church must now be a prophetic witness to the country and the world, and especially to the Anglican Communion. This is a profound responsibility for us all, and the leadership of Bishop Curry will be crucial. It is not a time to be proud and haughty, to shame those that don't agree with the changes made. It is not a time to be intolerant. Prophetic witness is about example, every day, in private and corporate life.

Sermon Proper 9 - July 5, 2015

Cathedral of the Incarnation

Prophetic witness is not really different today than it was for Ezekiel, Paul, Jesus or the apostles. Prophetic witness is not about screaming from the soapbox in a crowded market, or from the TV screen. It is about living out the gospel, God's good news to love God, and love our neighbors in small ways, genuine ways, by example. People will see and feel a difference from you just from your presence in your homes, in your church and in your workplace and community. It is living out our faith even in the midst of tragedy and suffering, in the midst of deep pain in our hearts.

In the afternoon of the killing of 10 Amish schoolgirls in the West Nickel Mine School in Pennsylvania, the grandfather of one of the girls expressed forgiveness toward the killer Charles Roberts. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Robert's family to comfort them in their sorrow and grief. And the Amish families and friends outnumbered the other mourners at Charles Robert's funeral.

Many in the wider community couldn't understand these reactions from the victim's families. There they were though, reactions of forgiveness and love coming out of tragedy and sadness. Their actions and the actions of the families at the bail hearing of Dylann Roof have left an indelible mark on this world. Their actions give us hope that God's presence in the world continues through prophetic witness. In our actions we too leave a mark on this world. The question is – what mark will you leave?

Amen