

Sermon – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 10: 5-15

Politico journalist Jack Shafer, wrote in an article published in May of this year, that commenced with the line, “Donald Trump issues threats with the frequency other people take out the garbage.” Catchy I thought! He went on to list a litany of threats the President has made against companies, nations, all manner of people, congress, justices, political opponents and many others.

As the election cycle comes full circle in a few short months I found myself wondering about the nature of the President’s threats and whether any of us should really be worried. Mostly his threats tend to ring hollow, all bluff and bluster we might say. We’ve learned that our President has lived his life in a posture of threatening behavior. There are a lot of people in our world who take a similar posture in life. Bullying is rather an immature response to a particular situation so when someone issues threats *ad nauseum* it says a lot about their character, especially their fear of failure.

It can be however, quite unsettling when world leaders threaten each other because we know from history that conflict can escalate quickly to the point of no return. We’ve had the Cuban missile crisis, the Vietnam and Korean wars, the Iraqi invasion and the war on terror in Afghanistan. No we have trade wars and cultural wars. The increase in tension awakens us to our vulnerability and the fragility of the world even though we might be far removed. We are though always reliant on the President, as Commander in Chief, and his advisors to promote peace and to steer us away from conflict.

In most western countries I think we like to see ourselves as enlightened nations formed largely by Christians espousing Christian values. The United States is perceived as a modern democratic society, with religious tolerance and an ethnically diverse population. At the last Presidential election enough of the country fell in behind a person who exhibited this bullying character because they thought of him as a savior for them and for the country. We have lived the results and they have been ugly. It has been a reminder that we need to be continually vigilant about where we put our trust.

As Christians we should put our trust in God first should we not. It is God, through Jesus Christ that offers us salvation. Through our faith, believed in our hearts and confessed with our lips, we are saved. Paul tells us in his epistle to his friends in Rome “no one who believes in [God] will be put to shame,” that there is one Lord who is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on God. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” Paul says. What greater message of reassurance could we possibly asked for?

God has offered salvation since the fall of Adam and Eve. The doctrine of salvation that guides the church has been developed over the last two millennia. This doctrine deals with the restoration of the created order, and above all humanity, to its proper relationship with God. The church as the body of Christ is critical here because it is the mission of the church to restore all people to God and each other through Christ. You will find this

stated in the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer. If we are looking for a mission statement for our church then we need look no further than this statement. Our whole focus should be on working towards restoring our relationship to God.

Our distinctive approach to salvation as Christians is found in that statement. That is that salvation is grounded in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the shape of salvation is formed by Christ (McGrath p319).

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was something the world had never seen before. This unique event opened up a new way to restoration through redemption, that is the act of God that sets us free from the power of sin, evil and death. Redemption has given us a new understanding of an age-old truth that is only revealed to us in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Christ came into the world to reveal the saving nature of God, not to establish that saving will in the first place.

The shape of salvation through Christ comes as we try and live our lives founded on his teachings and closely imitating Jesus' relationships with people. Through this, we are brought into conformity with Christ as "the outward aspects of a believer's life are brought into line with the inward relationship to Christ, established through faith." (McGrath p318)

In Paul's epistle this morning we heard that salvation is claimed through our faith held deeply in our hearts and confessed through our lips, as we speak to our belief that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. But what about all those that never hear about the good news of Jesus and die ignorant of his saving grace. Is it possible that they too can be saved?

There are two main schools of thought about this issue. The first is that God wishes for all people to be saved. The second is that salvation is only possible in and through Jesus Christ.

The first concept is known as Universalism. The essence of Universalism is that in the end grace and love will triumph over death and separation from God. God has elected to be a friend and partner of all humanity and through sending Jesus Christ to us has accepted the pain and cost of redemption. God will bear rejection, condemnation and death that are the inevitable consequences of sin. Theologian Karl Barth says "any notion of predestination to condemnation is eliminated. The only one who is predestined to condemnation is Jesus Christ who for all eternity willed to suffer for us." (McGrath p370) The door to salvation is open to everyone, not a select few.

The second school of thought is that only believers in God will be saved. Augustine was one of the first theologians to really tackle this aspect of salvation and cited numerous scriptural quotations to support his thesis. An example is from John 6:51 "I am the living bread that came down from heaven," Jesus said. "If anyone eats of this bread they will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, argued that one has to have faith in God in order to be saved but affirmed that this faith need not be explicitly Christian. CW Lewis took a similar view saying, “there are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who therefore belong to Christ without knowing it.”

At the commencement of his sermon I mentioned the penchant of our President to threaten anyone who doesn’t do his will – national leaders, world organizations, congress, justices, journalists, businesses, individuals and on and on I could go. The perplexing thing for me is that many conservative Christians still line up behind the President and support his approach to getting his way. It is somehow perceived as a character strength and will help “Make America Great Again.” They excuse his behavior as necessary to get their agenda met.

Unless we engage with these Christians, we don’t really understand exactly how they balance their faith with a political leader who seems to be the antithesis of a Christian, and seemingly undermining Christian values rather than upholding them. Many of the far-right followers of the President, white supremacists for instance, also claim that God is on their side, supportive of their determination to reign supreme over immigrants and people of color. So will these people receive salvation from God? Are they coerced into a particular way of life, much like North Korea’s citizens know nothing other than to follow their “dear Leader,” or ignorant of other ways of thinking and being.

We have no real idea about what they are experiencing deep in their souls but we can have some hope that God is working in their hearts to awaken them from their waywardness to see the light of truth that their actions are not in alignment with Gods.

Those who follow Jesus Christ have a sure and certain hope of salvation, no matter how much doubt we carry on our hearts. With this comes a responsibility to ensure our hope is radiated out to the community so we can offer to them the certain hope of salvation.

We can only hope for the white supremacists and nationalists of this country, and other people raised in darkness trusting in a false savior, that they will be led by “God’s secret influence,” see the light eventually and commit themselves to the pursuit of peace, goodness and truth, even though they may have no formal knowledge of Jesus Christ. (McGrath p346)

Our role as Christians is to do what we can to introduce the lost to God through the good news of Jesus Christ so that their restoration might be assured. We don’t have to convert people, as this is the work of the Holy Spirit. What we can and must do is to introduce people to God through our welcome, baptism, our worship, our pastoral care, our outreach and our lived example.

Paul says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of

whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?"

"How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things." This is a beautiful image from Paul. We need to preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings that are made possible through our faith in God. How beautiful indeed are the feet of those that work for peace.

There is a huge need in this world for our work, especially in our community. I mentioned in my newsletter reflection that within 10 years some 17,000 new residents will live within 500' of our church. A new world on our doorstep. We prayerfully need to seek God's guidance for ourselves and for the church as to how to reach these people. At this time of escalating rhetoric around the presidential and congressional election, the message of salvation through Jesus Christ and through peace, justice and love is needed more than ever.

So now look down and reflect on how beautiful your feet might be today?

Amen