

Sermon – Lent 2 – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

Luke 13: 31-35

The somber mood of Lent took on a decidedly heavier feel on Friday when news reached me of yet another mass killing of innocent and faithful men, women and children. This time it was in Christchurch, New Zealand. This tragic event at the Al Noor and Linwood Mosques brought instantly to mind the shocking assassination of nine men and women attending bible study at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and the 11 men and women assassinated in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Each time a relatively young, white male nationalist was responsible. The killer in Christchurch was from Australia, from a town I know well. I knew that Australia, like the United States had bred a significant white nationalist movement. Over the past 20 years their hatred rose as refugees from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars fled south to Australia. These men and women deeply resent immigrants from non-European countries and are encouraged in their actions by sympathetic politicians, media hosts and online hate groups.

It is particularly galling that these people claim to be acting to restore the supremacy of white Christians. This latest killer talked about the crusades from the 12th c when Christian Kings and noblemen lead crusades from Britain to the Holy land to fight the Muslim occupiers of the Holy City and to reclaim it. This latest terrorist felt he was starting a new crusade against Islamic countries.

The young man who carried out these murders was motivated by a distorted sense of justice, an example of the evil of retribution. Faithful men and women at prayer seem like an easy target for terrorists. After all, such violence is the furthest thing from their hearts and minds. They just seek communion with a God that emanates love, justice and mercy. The men, women and children murdered in houses of worship are now martyrs for their faith.

The conditions in the world seem to be just right for these terrorists. Social media allows for their conditioning by giving a platform for the many online hate groups and conspiracy theorists to exist. Social media platforms also provide the outlet for the unedited video feed. It was shocking how quickly the live feed of the murders reverberated around the world, viewed and reposted by thousands of people.

Political leaders from around world were quick to condemn the actions of this man and to offer support to the people of New Zealand and the Islamic communities. However, the most powerful political leader in the world chose to offer a blended message of sympathy with a limp and pathetic response when asked if white supremacists were on the rise. He thought not. Such a weak response gives cover to these domestic terrorists. This lack of confrontation to these threats is appalling.

Some world leaders seek to foster fear in communities by scapegoating Muslim immigrants. Creating fear is a political tactic used by many so-called 'nationalist' leaders. Rather than act justly to repudiate white nationalist's actions they offer oft-repeated vague responses. The white nationalists and the sympathetic political leaders feed off, and depend on one another for survival.

This type of behavior is not new to our world. The treatment of slaves by the establishment of the past few centuries followed the same pattern. Political leaders needed the support of the slave-owner class and the slave-owner class needed the support of the political leaders. There was a comfortable co-existence that trapped slaves in perpetual servitude.

I have been reading a biography of Frederick Douglass and I was interested to read the account of his relationship with Sophia Aulds, the wife of his owner, when he was an 11-year-old boy. Sophia took to the young Frederick as he lay under her feet as she read from the Book of Job. He was taken with her voice and the story of Job's testing and faithful perseverance. He soon came to see words as his holiest possession which led him to declare that he would no longer refrain his mouth.

As Frederick's literacy grew he soon became a threat to his master. Mr. Auld forbade his wife from further teaching the boy and reminded her that literacy was unlawful for slaves in Maryland. The withholding of education was a suppression tactic to keep the unholy alliance of politicians and slave-owners on foot.

Frederick Douglass and many other freed slaves who became aware that education was a pathway to freedom, used their newfound awareness to advocate for the emancipation of slaves in the United States and across the world. They learnt how to confront the sin of slavery in mostly peaceful ways. Their courage to challenge the status quo was prophetic and Frederick Douglass often drew strength from the story of Jeremiah's life and the faithfulness and perseverance of Job.

Herod and the Pharisees had a similar co-dependent relationship. Herod ruled politically and the Pharisees ruled religiously. Together they had a common purpose in keeping the peace and thwarting anything that would act as a threat to it. It is sort of like how Saudi Arabia operates today.

Jerusalem was the holiest place in Judaism and so pilgrims made their way to the holy city all the time. Amongst the pilgrims were the prophets who continually confronted injustice in the communities in which they lived. They were seen as threats and they became scapegoats killed at the hands of the community often by stoning to death.

It is from this unholy alliance that I see the motivation of the Pharisees to warn Jesus not to go to Jerusalem because Herod was supposedly seeking to kill him. The Pharisees knew Jesus would be a threat to the status quo and someone who could not be controlled. So, they warned him to stay away. Jesus knew that as a prophet of God going up to Jerusalem, where many other prophets had been killed, meant he might not survive.

Jesus knew the Pharisee's motivations and those of Herod, who had previously killed the innocent children and John the Baptist. Jesus compared him to a fox, a sly, devious and predatory creature. Jesus lamented the fact that he only wanted to have a loving and protective relationship with everyone, much like a hen cares for her chicks but most people were not interested. The contrast of Herod as a fox and Jesus as a gatherer and nurturer couldn't be starker.

Jesus had the courage to stand up to both the Pharisees and Herod and to risk destabilizing their cozy alliance for the sake of restoring justice and mercy to the holy city. His confrontational

approach was unusual but necessary in this situation and it paved the way for his continued journey toward Jerusalem and ultimately to Calvary.

The world needs people who will stand up for justice in our communities and confront with love those that foster hate. Our world is flooded with guns that are bought as easy as buying groceries. We need politicians who will stand up and limit the access to these weapons of war without delay. We need people who will protect people of all faiths who only seek to gather for worship in peace, just like we are doing this morning. We need leaders who will protect our children at schools and who are not made impotent by the support of special interest groups.

The world needs leaders who will make access to literacy for girls and boys throughout the world their priority. We need leaders who will destabilize human trafficking operations and release those that have been enslaved. We need leaders who have the courage to call out unfair and unjust landlords, business owners and those that seek to destabilize society by spreading hatred in all its forms. We need the owners of these billion-dollar internet businesses to control them more tightly to prevent the spread of hate.

The world has seen many prophets who find the courage to stand for what is right and true in how we as humans live in the world as creations of a loving and merciful God. Many have their lives taken too early because of their actions. Jesus knew that his destiny was the cross and he strode toward it without hate in his heart. He carried our collective weaknesses to the cross and thereafter defeated death so that we might see hope for our futures.

The struggle for justice in this world is ongoing. Many are content to shuffle along in the shadow of life. However, as Christians we are to follow the example of Jesus and stand up to the bullies, the haters, the agitators and the antagonists in the communities in which we live, work and worship. This loving confrontation is what it means to 'love our enemies.' God gives us the courage through our faith in him to confront those that are a danger to all.

We will continue to be shocked by the callous nature of those that seek to turn us against our neighbors. We will continue to be disappointed in the leadership of many politicians. We will be saddened by the violent ways people are treated in the world. However, we can draw hope and solace knowing that Jesus went before us and showed us the way to respond to the world that sometimes feels so out of control.

Amen