

c19Pentecost 16 ~ September 12, 2010 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at Old St. Andrew's Church, Bloomfield, CT

Jeremiah 4.11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1.12-17; Luke 15.1-10

September 12th, 2010. Nine years and a day since everything changed. When airplanes crashed around us and thousands of innocent people died. Today, we still live in the shadow of that horrific day and mourn for the halcyon days before those attacks.

Related both indirectly and directly to 911, we, as a people, shoulder the burden of two phenomenally expensive wars, an economic distress of epic proportions, high unemployment, an ideologically driven, uncivil Congress, thinly veiled racism, homophobia, immigration-phobia, and Islam-a-phobia. Where to begin? How much time do we have?

I can start in only one place: the Jesus story. Once upon a time, there was a man—a Jew—who walked the dusty roads of Palestine when the Romans oppressed the people of the land and the Temple, in their own way, did so, too. This man—Jesus of Nazareth—stood over against the domination systems of both the Romans and the Temple elite.

We know very little about Jesus. But, what we do know is so extraordinary that we continue to talk about him and how he led his life as a wandering teacher. Jesus taught by telling stories, quoting from the Hebrew scriptures, using parables, and especially by example. From what's remembered of Jesus, he was most concerned about being compassionate, being forgiving, standing for justice, and loving unconditionally. Compassion, Forgiveness, Justice, and Love.

Jesus was killed because he taught and lived these ideals. If people who listened to Jesus changed the way they lived their lives, this would be simply too great a threat to both the Romans and the Temple elite. But killing the man did not kill who he was or the lessons he taught.

So charismatic was the person of Jesus and so powerful was his message that people who knew him experienced in Jesus the face of God. After he was killed, Mary Magdalene, and then others, continued to feel and know his presence among them. His inspiration and very Spirit endured and endures today.

“So what?” you might ask. “We know all of that.” And, that is exactly my point. Because we know who Jesus was and what he taught us, I think we are compelled to look through the lens of the Jesus story right now at what is happening around us today.

One example—At a time when those with whom one ate said everything about who you were, Jesus shared his table with sinners, the clean and unclean, Pharisees and tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers, men, women and children. His unmitigated equanimity expresses for us 2,000 years later the absolute necessity for our own inclusion of all who come to our Table—the kitchen table, the table on which our Constitution is kept, the table at the door of entry to this land, the table on which the Hebrew scriptures lie, the table where our Bible stands, the table holding the sacred Qur'an, the table where the Native American peace pipe rests.

The people who frighten me the very most are extremely religious zealots. Christians. Jews. Muslims. Hindus. Sikhs. Members of obscure sects. The reason? Because they insist they are RIGHT. *God has spoken to them*, or some such thing. Remember Jim Jones? And now, this Terry Jones, who has a congregation of 30 or 40 souls in Gainesville, Florida, holds the world hostage by his anti-Muslim, anti-Jesus rhetoric. Remember the part about Jesus welcoming all people to the Table? This man gives me pause.

One of the only ways I can navigate craziness like this is to think about Jesus strolling up to the Dove World Outreach Center—YES, Dove, as in dove of Peace, that's the name of Pastor Jones' church—and saying to Mr. Jones, "Say, Terry, my name is Jesus. Can we chat?" My imagination swirls and I play out various scenarios between Pastor Jones and Jesus ... Thank God he didn't burn any Qur'ans yesterday.

But, the intolerance and arrogance of Mr. Jones is only symptomatic of myriad spurious attitudes and movements afoot in America, none of which is in the spirit of the Jesus story.

Today, we begin a three week series for our adult education forum about immigration. The passions surrounding this issue could incinerate a city. Our hope, our commitment here at OSA is to discuss the question of immigration in America so we might learn and so better understand how we have in the past and can in the future welcome people to this great country. And this, I contend, is the Jesus Way. It's not to have a food fight and to make "points" for being right or proving somebody else wrong. It's the Way of listening, openness, thoughtfulness, learning, respecting, agreeing and disagreeing. We cannot and will not solve the problems surrounding immigration. We can and will, however, demonstrate for ourselves how to have a civil dialogue of give and take. Again, the Jesus Way, something sorely lacking in our national discourse these days.

There is much more to say in the spirit of Jesus' Way of Being—about the courageous Judge who just struck down 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' about

moderate Muslims who want to build a cultural center and mosque near Ground Zero, about Barack Obama, who really was born in the United States, about the marriage rights of gay and lesbian people, about recovering our economic health and improving the employment picture, about strengthening our educational system, about ending two costly wars ...

What seems so important to me is that here in Bloomfield, Connecticut, we—as friends, neighbors, and members of this parish community—recommit ourselves to living in the Way of Jesus.

I'm often asked, "So, what can we actually do?" We can stand in the fires of Justice for *ALL*, privately and publically. We can open our hearts and minds with Compassion for *ALL*, and demonstrate it through our actions. We can remember our own shortcomings and so offer Forgiveness to ourselves and to *ALL* who trespass against us. And. And, we can Love. We can Love *ALL*, for God did not create just those who are like us or who agree with us. God created *ALL* humankind and this fragile earth in a vast cosmic universe. None among us is independent of Creation's blessing.

We are constantly challenged by the circumstances of life—911, Pastor Jones antics, earthquakes and more. To rise to the occasion, as people who take Jesus seriously is what we need to be about.

Compassion. Forgiveness. Justice. Love.

Amen.

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