

## **May 15, 2022 (Focus: Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35) Fifth Sunday of Easter**

Like many pastors, I found myself yesterday afternoon and evening rewriting my sermon, not for the first time after a mass shooting. And like my colleagues, I'm sick about it and sick of it. There have been too many mass shootings, too much domestic terrorism, too much excusing the use of assault weapons by civilians against civilians, too much death and destruction in the name of so-called white supremacy.

And like all of you, I will probably feel better after this reflection, as if in condemning the terrorism and the racism that we have done something about the evils of the world. But even in our self-righteousness, we will only feel a little better, for we know there will be another time, much too soon, when we will face such racism and violence again. And we won't feel much better, for we know that this reflection here today won't do much good, for I am talking with folks who I think mostly agree with me already. So why say it, why reflect on the violence of another mass shooting? Why reflect on another incident of racist terrorism?

We speak of it because we aren't afraid of the truth – it shines a light on something we would like to hope doesn't exist, yes, but ignoring it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. And it is something we can do, when we feel powerless against such a huge issue, so we say something. And we speak of it for we feel that someone should, especially someone who is white, for if we as whites don't speak out against such actions, we would rightly be seen as complicit.

And we speak of it because the gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to do so. I know what I say today will not stop the killing and the vehement hatred that is held against people just because they are a different color, but I have to cry out, for the Word compels me to not stay silent. The Word compels me to not just let it happen and say, "well, that's the way the world is, nothing I can do about it." For this is not how the world should be, not the peaceable kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, the peaceable kingdom Jesus showed us could be so.

So, that begs the question, do we look to a specific gospel or scriptural passage to help us face the news today? Is there a special place where Jesus spoke specifically about this problem? Well, let's be bold and start with the passages that were already planned for today's service. And pow, we are

confronted with our passage from John's gospel, where Jesus, not for the first or last time in the gospels, tells us to love one another. Yes, Jesus spoke about our problems today, the problems of gun violence and domestic terrorism and racial terrorism: he said they were wrong; love one another. But wait, Jesus doesn't just tell us, or preach to us about how we should love one another, he commands us: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another." It is pretty much the only way that he told his disciples, his followers, that others would know that we are his followers, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Wow, it couldn't be more direct; do this, and people will know you are my followers. Don't do this, and they won't see you as my followers. Love one another. This isn't optional, if you want to be my followers. Love one another.

And he goes further, showing us the way: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." How has he loved us? How has he showed us how to love one another? He has offered us a seat at the table. He has offered us God's love and grace. He has heard our cries and healed us. He has welcomed us into the fold. He has fed us and honored our differences (after all, they all had different skills when he called them, and then later Peter denied him and Thomas doubted him and the woman at the well shared the good news with her neighbors and Mary anointed him and they all to various degrees had trouble understanding his message). He has blessed us. He has guided us and helped us to see that we were made for more than just selfish ambitions and fear-based living. He has shown us that we are made for community. He has shown us that things could be on earth as they are in heaven, that the new earth could be now, that God does dwell among us, and that God themselves will be with us, all of us. He has shown us that we can trust that God indeed does proclaim "I am making all things new."

Often in life, especially in times of change or stress or when we might feel threatened, we seek the familiar. And sometimes seeking that familiar has served us well. As a child when we were afraid, we turned to our parents: the thunderstorm rages at night, and we ask our parents, can I sleep with you tonight; we are going to a new school and we say, please hold my hand. Home and family, when they are good, serve us, center us. At times when we have a difficult decision to make or we aren't sure the path to take...trusted friends or colleagues or mentors, teachers, pastors, etc., someone who listens, not to respond, but for understanding. Someone who knows that what we might need in that moment isn't action but presence, walking with.

But sometimes fear and anxiety mislead us; sometimes anxiety and fear make us believe that the familiar is what is needed. I don't want change, I don't want things to be different, I want the "good old days" which weren't all that great for very many. Or I need someone to blame for my troubles so I'll go to the old familiar demons of my parents or their parents, the people that they blamed for their troubles (the black, the immigrant, the woman libbers, the Irish/German/Italian...), because someone has to be to blame if my lot in life isn't exactly what I thought or hoped it would be.

But when things are not right, what is more likely to be needed is a new way, a new day. The old ways no longer serve us well, maybe never served us as well as we think they did, and seeking the familiar keeps us stuck. (And keeping us stuck helps others preserve their power and control.)

Jesus' new way wasn't all that new; love commandment also in the Old Testament. But in fear and despair, it was forgotten. In the midst of oppression and loss, it was neglected. In the midst of seeking someone else to blame, it was abandoned. Only the individual matters; only my needs, my opinion, my way. Every person for themselves; don't tread on me.

If we were all meant to have guns and use them, Jesus wouldn't have said "blessed are the peacemakers" and "Peace be with you" as many times as he did. If Christianity was supposed to be a white supremacy movement, it wouldn't have been led by someone who commanded us to love one another. In fact, if Jesus was just for whites, his first disciples would have been from among the Romans, not Jews.

Jesus is never about the individual; he never really tooted his own horn; his great miracle of feeding 5,000? It wasn't just Jesus who did that miracle; someone else provided the loaves and fish; his disciples passed them around; a communal effort. Love one another, Jesus commanded us, because he knew that if we didn't not see the kingdom of God as a collective effort, it would never fully come to fruition.

So yes, maybe this time of reflecting on the good news of the gospel is all just time wasted today; maybe "love one another" is just a vision not for earth but for heaven. Maybe those who need to hear this are the ones who won't. But maybe that is what they said on that Friday long ago, as their itinerant preacher friend from Galilee was executed by crucifixion, and more than one witness probably thought, if not said aloud, "all his work was for naught, what was the point?" But we know, Friday was not the last day, and the

executioners did not win, their violence did not kill the vision. The kingdom of God here on earth as in heaven was begun with Jesus, and is still a viable vision made known in the living Christ with us still. But it will never be fully realized until we actually see that love one another meant not just a select few, but all the one anothers in our world. Love one another is our way forward.