August 4h , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ordinary Time

10:30 am

Fearful Systems

1. Fearful Systems

It was November of 2018 when I gathered around the room with a bunch of ministry colleagues for work. Trump tweeted something that caused great outrage. People were calling Trump out, rolling their eyes, frustrated and angry at another tweet that would divide people. This built for about fifteen minutes before I could feel the stress along my shoulderblades rise to a point in which I could not help but speak. I said, in a different frustration, “Enough, enough. This is bigger than Trump. There’s an entire system, and we’re all in it and all accountable to it.”

True story. And I’ll say that I don’t think I was the most popular person in the room that moment, but the conversation ceased. If you want me to tell you that I don’t admire our President and his actions, I’ll tell you yes – but in truth, for me, the issues of the day that surround us are much bigger than one man.

We find this to be true in the Bible and throughout the course of history: hatred or violence or good is bigger than one person, it extends to a system that includes us, whether you are loud or complacent. What brought Jesus to the cross? Perhaps the word of Pontius, but moreso, the system that would condemn him. What brought other leaders, whether positive or negative in your mind to power – a system, a system of people and culture and societal norms.

And today we confront one of those societal systematic issues that is plaguing our country today. Mass gun violence, and for something to be considered ‘mass gun violence’ – four or more people have to be shot – so there’s much gun violence outside those parameters that we are not accounting for this morning. For every candle you see here this morning, each candle represents one person who has been killed by mass gun violence this year. 288 people. And nearly 1,000 wounded as of today. The statistics average out to 1.2 shootings a day in our country. And it is so fresh and on going, that I’ve had to keep more candles by my side, just incase there was another shooting last night. That’s the world we live in. It’s a harsh reality.

While not a mass shooting, right in Eldersburg, we had at armed robbery at our Walmart on Friday morning. Folks, the guns are not out there, they are here, in our backyards.

1. Do not worry little flock

So I struggled when I read the Scripture for this week, especially in light of looking at the gun crisis. We are told not to fear, that it is God’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom. And I respond back to the reading by saying – No, I’m fearful. Does this fear come out of an evil and fearful system? Yes. But it doesn’t change how I feel in this moment. I could be one of these 288. You could be one of these 288. That’s plenty of reason to fear.

The towns that popped up on the powerpoint represent each place in which a mass shooting has occurred this year. The song that you hear is from Odetta, a famous Gospel singer, singing ‘I sometimes feel like a motherless child.’ When I look at these candles, when I think of these people, I remember that there are those who lost mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and that life looks indelibly different.

1. But Get Ready

But if I look again at the reading for today, I recognize that God is not naïve to our needs – yes, there is a call not to worry about material things, but there is even more of a call to get ready. Get ready for the Kingdom to come, get ready for God to draw near, because you don’t know when it’ll happen. Make this world reflect the Kingdom of God, here, today, because this world is Christ’s own. Get ready.

I look down at the candles, representing the 288 people who have lost their lives, and the words that we so often hear, “We offer our thoughts and prayers.” But we have come to a crucial time in our lives as a nation: what if thoughts and prayers don’t seem to get us anywhere? Or, as Stephen Colbert put it on his late night show, “What if thoughts and prayers need to turn into shouts and swears.” When do we step beyond ourselves and step into love, where we take seriously each and every one of these candles and see them as a life cut short and a child of God’s life taken by armed hands. When do the abundance of these candles demand far more than our thoughts and prayers, but call us to action. When are we called to let God’s system that is bigger than fear, but is a system of love – when are we going to let that call override evil’s fearful systems and calls to stagnancy?

Today. God doesn’t call us to get ready tomorrow, or the day after that – but God calls us in the here and now with a great sense of urgency – get ready for the Kingdom. Get ready by defeating oppression, by ensuring justice, and by living a life of love where people encounter God when they encounter you. Get ready.

1. Action

You might ask the question, the very fruitful question of – Pastor Becca, this is all well and good, but what can I do? I would respond by telling you that you are part of a system, which means you have power, which means you have a voice and a say on what God’s Kingdom is going to look like here and now. I will never promise you that it is easy. I will never promise you that it won’t cause conflict or difficult feelings. I will never promise you that the work will be quick. I do promise you that the work we do on behalf of God and the Kingdom of God is worthwhile and life-altering work.

Where do you begin? Begin by stepping into public policies and calling or writing your representative. Begin by continuing to pray, but rather than asking for God’s comfort alone, ask God’s Spirit to step in, shake you up, and send you out into the world to do something beautiful and hard and meaningful to create positive change. Begin by educating yourself – go online, read a book, hear a podcast – get educated and in that education, you are bound to find more and more ways towards crafting a Kingdom of love.

As you leave this worship space today, I encourage you to pick up one of these candles. I would like you to bring it home, light it, remember that it stands for a person who has been killed senselessly by gun violence. Yet don’t stop there. As the wick burns, do some of those beginning actions – reading, education, writing your representative, praying. Begin by doing something and know that even in that small doing of something, you as one child of God, are bringing the Kingdom of God closer and closer -- and that light that you’ve lit will no longer represent pain and grief, but a light of Christ and a light of hope and action in this world that so desperately needs the light to overwhelm the darkness. Amen.