June 7 , 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Pentecost

**The Weaponization of the Word**

1. A beginning conversation

It was Thursday morning. I sat down to have my morning tele-health visit with my therapist. What is worth noting with the current protests that have been hitting the ground, is that my therapist happens to be a woman of color. She asked me, as she does every week, what was on my mind, and I said to her, somewhat fearful but somewhat brave, that the protests were hanging on my heart heavy these days. But I thought to myself, “Who am I, as a white person, to be complaining to her about these things?”

And then she nodded, she validated that heaviness and I continued, I said, “As a white person, with white privilege, I just want to find out how I can be the best white person I can be.” She nodded again, smiling, noting the perfectionistic tone of the sentence. But I continued, “On Sunday, I want to say something profound, but who am I to say anything? Who am I to educate or call to action a bunch of white people as a white person, to a lived experience that I’ve never had?”

And the reality came out in those words, because the privilege was right there. I have this platform, this pulpit, where for reasons sometimes unbeknownst to me, you come and listen, to hear the words I have to speak, but more importantly, to hear where God may speaking to us. Who am I – not – to speak, who am I to be silent? I have the privilege and a responsibility, even if that means causing some waves, to speak the truth and to do that out of a knowledge of the love of God.

And my therapist's words were indeed comforting. She reminded me that this is not a one Sunday problem to fix. But what was most poignant was my therapist’s attitude towards all of this activity – she said, “It gives me great hope.” And I looked admittedly confused, because I could feel the tension in my shoulders and I could hear my voice breaking when saying, “How?” And she said, “Becca, let this be the act of violence that changes us, that reforms a police system, that means people see me for who I am. It’s not going to be the last act of violence, I know, but you cannot get that image out of your head.”

And she’s right, in some profound ways, she’s right that I will never get the image out of my head, of seeing George Floyd, child of God, on the ground, be drained of oxygen. It haunts me and it should haunt me and it should haunt you, because it is the visceral call to action to say to white people – you need to act. You have the responsibility, the privilege, and you cannot deny what is happening – you need to hold people, all people, no matter their background, to accountability.

II. What the Prophet Tells Us

 Another visceral image that comes to us this week is our President as he stood before an Episcopalian parish and held the Bible in the same way you might hold up a pistol. He held our treasured Scripture while people were being tear-gassed, and rather than the Bible being a book of comfort, a source of call, a source of love – the book almost took on a weaponizing way – a way of validating a behaviour of violence.

 But let us not be remiss, this is not the first time, nor probably the last time, our Scripture has been used to vilify beliefs that we do not hold as true to the words inside the Word. The Word has been used as a means of colonization, not only by this President, but presidents of the past and world leaders in our history. And at home, it can become a weapon too. It has been used by folks to discriminate against LGBT people, to glorify patriarchy, to minimize others rather than showing all to be beloved children of God.

 And if we are truly honest with ourselves, and I know it hurts, but if we are – we must admit that we have used the Word as a weapon ourselves. We have sinned, perhaps early on in our faith journey, perhaps unknowingly, we have used the Word as a means to prove our point, to validate ourselves, and sometimes we’ve done that in a way that really harms others.

III. The Pen is Mightier than the Sword

 When we think of a weapon, we probably think of such things as firearms, swords, knives – but the old adage stands true – the pen is mightier than the sword. Words can be biting and every day, every single day, we have the choice in the way in which we use our words, to either push down or to amplify love.

 Isaiah’s words ring true today, when he looks towards a future where the sword will become a plowshare, their spears into pruning hooks. No longer shall any nation rival against another, and the love of the Lord will reign in this Holy place. All those things that were developed to harm, to injure, to slay – are now used in Isaiah’s prophecy as a means of growth, cultivation, and love. Not only does Isaiah take those things that harm and destroy them, which would have been enough – but no, he takes them on and says – let us create something new.

 If we want God’s Kingdom to reign, if want our world to look more in line with what Isaiah prophesied, then we need to take all of those things that can cause harm and craft them towards being a source of life. If the Word can be a weapon, then it certainly can be transformed into something that resembles the life God longs for us – it can be used as a means to build up, to encourage, to show love, to guide, to be a source of all good for all people in all places. This job as such is not up to people in false states of power, but in reality – it is the responsibility of all of us, no matter our background, it is our privilege to show forth the Word in a light that builds up rather than casts down.

 And we also want to use the Word in a way that cultivates, just like those pruning hooks. We are called to cut back those things that destroy, that malign, that cause pain, and bear fruit. In this way, we are called to prune back those systems that oppress, those powers that allow violence to reign, and deconstruct those things of harm so we can see what lies underneath – a bedrock of love.

IV. Where to Begin?

 We have been inundated with news and by no means has 2020 been an easy year already. The tension in our back only tightens as the months wear on, so where is our hope. Well, back to the trusted therapist, she also reminded me that we are all called to different action – to find again where the Holy Spirit is moving us and move there. You do not have to go to protests, but maybe you write a letter, or perhaps you donate, or perhaps you read a book or watch a film that educates you on past race relations and current racial discrimination and divides.

 You can’t do everything. We can’t fix this in one Sunday. So the Pentecost mindset needs to run through our blood not only last Sunday, but every day as we seek to do what we are called to do. Listen in, listen closely, find where you are called to help, where you are called to share the words that build up in love, where you are called to name the systems that oppress and seek a new way that embodies God’s love for all of God’s people. And may you know, that on this journey, this long road ahead, you are not alone – may you know the love of God that surrounds you, the community that upholds you, and the Spirit that shall not desert you as you turn those things that harm into those things of new life and signs of God’s love. Amen.