

You Asked For it: “Words That Linger”

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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Text: Matthew 13:1-9

“And other [seeds] fell on the good soil, and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.”

- Matthew 13:8-9

Prayer

Holy God,

Quiet our minds and prepare our hearts

To listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Startle us, we pray, with your word

And help us to know and to love you.

In Christ’s name we pray.

Amen.

It happened again! Terrorist attacks spread insecurity and fear throughout the world by killing and wounding scores of innocent people riding on public transportation in what could have been otherwise an uneventful morning in London.

At lunch time on Thursday, a friend of mine from Chicago called me to talk about the four coordinated bombings that sent a ripple of anguish and apprehension around the globe. Her voice was filled with anxiety and disbelief as she told me the attacks in London – a city that is so closely related to the United States historically and culturally – made her feel less safe, more vulnerable and even more aware of the slow, quiet, subtle and yet highly destructive nature of terrorism. She ended our conversation by saying that she now fears another attack in American soil is just a matter of time.

On the news, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, condemned the attacks and affirmed that **“Islamist radicals would not weaken the resolve of Britons to uphold the most deeply held principles and values of the British society.”** (Paraphrased from article in the *New York Times*, 07/07/05) Of course this is the same discourse used by fundamentalist Muslims who believe the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan to be a direct attack on the most deeply held principles and values of the Muslim world.

In this apparent clash of civilizations it is hard not to take sides or to ask who is right and who is wrong. Whose principles and values are more important and relevant and should be upheld by the human community? Who has the power to prescribe normative solutions to the challenges at hand? In this

battle of values and words, it seems that humanity is fated to live in a divided world.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian Roman Catholic priest who was one of the founders of the movement of Liberation Theology in South America, said in one of his lectures at the Catholic University of Rio that **“Humanity must understand once for all that there is just one world in which we live. There is no First or Third World; East or West; The Christian world or the Muslim World – those are inventions devised by our sinful need to separate and segregate people. We live in the same world and, therefore, we must learn how to accept our differences, celebrate our unique gifts and live with one another without harming or destroying the gift of life.”** I couldn’t agree more with Gutiérrez’s view and I am afraid we will continue to fight and kill each other causing suffering and pain to innocent people as long as we are guided by these artificial and insidious inventions that divide humankind.

And it is in this context of human pain and suffering, in which our lives seem to be defined by catastrophes, wars, and terrorist attacks that I want to address the question raised by one of our parishioners in the **“YOU ASKED FOR IT”** summer sermon series. The question asked is one that is very pertinent to the Church: ***How can “we” mainline churches get out our message of love and joy to the multitude who envision Christianity as self-serving with a narrow and literal reading of the Bible?***

José Martí, one of the most prominent Cuban writers and a national hero who lived in the latter half of the nineteenth century, said something I believe mainline churches ought to take to heart. Martí said, **“La major forma de creer és vivir.”** A simple and literal translation of this saying in English is, **“The best way to believe is to live.”** Or in a more extended translation, which involves some interpretation of this aphorism, Martí simply stated the obvious, **“the best way to express one’s true beliefs is by embodying them in the way one lives.”**

This pithy saying doesn’t really tell us anything new, does it? For centuries Christians have preached that the only way to experience the blessings and challenges of the Christian life is by taking up our own cross daily to follow in Jesus’ footsteps. The reality, however, is that only God knows how difficult it is for us to live out our beliefs with such integrity that our outward actions become a living testimony of our inward convictions. And it can be particularly difficult to profess faith in the transforming words of the Gospel when the seeds of peace, love, forgiveness and human solidarity seem to be so easily crushed under the weight of religious intolerance, Christian fundamentalism, holy war, terrorist attacks and acts of random violence that fill the pages of our newspapers. All it takes is one day’s headlines to make us ask ourselves whether the message Christ entrusted to the Church can indeed bring healing and salvation to humankind. Speaking of peace and love to a world so deeply divided, where

people place more trust on weapons and violence than on the biblical message of forgiveness and reconciliation, seems to be a vain attempt to make a real difference. So we assume that the best we can do as Christians is to come to church on Sunday morning to worship in our comfortable, air-conditioned sanctuaries, where the noise of the world outside cannot disturb us; oh! And we do pray for the suffering millions. Yes! We pray that somehow their suffering will end or will be allayed, but then we go back to the safety of our homes to carry on with our lives. For me, this is exactly where the Christian community and particularly mainline denominations falter.

Christ did not call us to be Sunday morning worshippers. Christ calls us to be his disciples in our daily lives. He invites us to be part of a journey in which we are to share the Good News with the world so that this broken and divided global community may take hold of the true life that we can only encounter in the source of all life. As a matter of fact, Christ calls us to share the Good News by telling the Gospel story in ways that make sense to the world outside the church. The Sunday morning worship is just a small part of what it means to be part of the Church of Jesus Christ. If we are serious about our faith and about what it means to us and to the world, then we've got to go out there, into the world to preach and teach the words of the Gospel where people need to listen to them. I am not saying that we have to turn every person we come across into a Christian, but I am saying that what we know about God through Jesus is of great relevance to humankind. Because Christians are tellers of the story, which does not transform the human heart by denying the reality of the world we live in, instead we offer the world a more hopeful way to live. In the Gospel, there are beatitudes for the stricken and words of wisdom for the blind. There are instructions for the powerful and parables for the hard of hearing. There are acted-out words of God for those who no longer trust words and there is finally silence when all else has failed. By and large, our ministry with the poor, the oppressed, the proud and arrogant, the broken-hearted, the wealthy and the unbeliever is a ministry of words - words that are in themselves seeds of a new life. Words that teach us to turn to the pain of the world hoping that it may open broken hearts to God's liberating message of kindness, hope, love, and reconciliation.

All of us here this morning came to faith because someone, somewhere said something to us. Something that soothed us, intrigued us, comforted us, challenged us; something that brought us back for more and eventually changed our lives. It was perhaps just a small seed cast in our hearts that grew and bore the everlasting fruits of faith.

Unfortunately, as Frederick Buechner says, the problem with mainline denominations today is that we have adopted what he calls a “**tourist preaching**” style. Buechner argues that “**English-speaking tourists abroad are inclined to believe that if only they speak English loudly and distinctly and slowly enough, the natives will know what is being said even though**

they do not understand a single word of the language. Similarly, Christians believe that if only they speak the ancient [biblical] verities loudly, distinctly and slowly enough, people will understand them. However, the truth is that the only language people really understand is their own language, and unless we are prepared to translate the ancient verities into it, we might as well save our breath,” for we will not be heard or understood.

Given the proportions and dimensions of the problems that afflict and affect humanity, the Good News of Jesus Christ may appear to be the smallest of all seeds without any chance to germinate in the arid soil of this troubled world. After all, prescribing the words of Christ to an ailing world seems as futile as putting a bandage in a broken bone or an aspirin in the hand of someone dying. However, when the church is bold enough to speak the Good News in the language of the people, the results are beyond control. The seeds sown will produce abundant fruits: they will dry tears; they will quench fears; they will forgive sins; they will heal the soul; they will transform the human heart and will give us hope for a better life even in the face of terrorist attacks and war.

So friends, “*How can “we” mainline churches get our message of love and joy out to the multitudes?*”

We can do it by embracing wholeheartedly Christ’s call to us. We can do it by showing the world that we are not simply concerned about filling our pews with Sunday morning worshippers, but that we believe in the power of the Gospel to transform the world because we have experienced that power in our own lives. The Roman Catholic theologian John Dominic Crossan alerts us that, **“one of the abiding temptations of pastors [and why not say of Christians in general] is to replace a lived life with a preached sermon or an interesting idea.”** We forget that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are not dealing with abstract and intellectually stimulating ideas only. As people who live by the transforming words of the Gospel story, we are dealing with real people, who have real lives and are looking for a genuine answer for their fears, anxieties and questions about the meaning of life. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan friar, reminds us there are a lot of people out there who are eager to experience the message of joy and love that the Church has to offer, they are **“youth who want both inspiration and structure, [women] who must know that they have an essential truth, patriarchs who need to be challenged but not dismissed, the simple who need assurance, the broken who don’t need more words but a healing touch, the seekers who need depth and patience, the alienated who both need and fear ‘home,’ gays and lesbians who need acceptance before agenda, males who need soul work, parents who need skills, the oppressed who need justice and solidarity, believers who need to believe again.”**

So friends, if we want to share this message of love, joy and salvation, we must get busy. And we must get busy out there in the world. We

must take out into the world the seeds of the Good News of Jesus Christ to show the world a brighter light to live by. It is like the W. H. Auden wrote in his poem September 1, 1939:

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies,
Yet, dotted everywhere
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair
Show an affirming flame.

Let us go out into the world showing this affirming flame, bearing the seeds of Christ's eternal words for sowing, trusting that we shall come back home with shouts of joy, carrying our sheaves. Amen!

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