

SCRIPTURE READING Hebrews 9:23-28

Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

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Text: But as it is, Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

On the morning of Tuesday, October 20th of this year I awoke to the news of yet one more terrorist attack. This was a suicide bombing in a university in Pakistan, the bomber having entered the women's cafeteria and detonated an explosive vest killing five. I remember being struck by the reporter telling the NPR audience of what she saw. She was vividly graphic, describing the blood all over the walls and pooled on the floor, and telling of the fact that they speculated that there were two suicide bombers because they had found two sets of legs. I shut the radio off. It was too much information. Deadened as I thought I was to yet one more report of yet one more suicide bombing, this one was too much for me.

In an odd twist of circumstances I sat down an hour later to begin my preparation for this sermon. I was struggling with the difficult text from the epistle to the Hebrews we just heard read, and I was also thinking of Karl Barth's famous homiletic dictum that the preacher should write a sermon with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in other. So, I had the audio newspaper running in my head of a martyr sacrificing himself, and then my chosen text for the sermon: "But as it is, Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself." And so I asked myself the obvious question, *If Jesus is willing to sacrifice himself for God, how is he different from the suicide bomber?*

We know, of course that there are substantial differences between Jesus and a terrorist. Jesus died forgiving others; the terrorist died condemning others. Jesus's blood was the only blood shed; the terrorist's blood is the means to others' blood shed. Jesus died for the love of all humanity; the terrorist died for the hate of much of humanity. Jesus died with compassionate mercy; the terrorist died with vengeful hate. Jesus died hoping there was a heaven for all; the terrorist died sure a hell for others. Yes, there are substantial differences between Jesus and the terrorist.

However, as much as it makes us uncomfortable, there is one very important point of agreement between Jesus and the stereotypical terrorist: they both died in the hope of correcting injustice; they both wanted to fix the world in the name of God.

I propose to you that on some primal level we all understand the terrorist's sacrifice very well because we are all wounded by the world's injustices and we all know that at times we have to stand up and be counted. As the bumper sticker says, "If you are not outraged, then you are not paying attention." And I propose to you also that on some primal level we also understand Jesus' sacrifice because we are all wounded by the world's injustices and we know that violence breeds retaliatory violence, and injustice breeds retaliatory injustice. Two wrongs don't make a right.

So here we are, a gathered Christian church, trying to walk the Jesus Road . . . trying to walk "Ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ"—on the Way (as it says in the Bible), understanding both the terrorist and the Christ. Daily we hear of terrorism. And once a week in church we hear of God's response to it. This is our context: a world rent by violence, edgy due to terrorism, and filled with people fighting and killing over who is just and who is unjust. Our context is our own outrage at the injustices in the world, in our own backyards. Our context is what is in front of us as we read the paper day in and day out. Our context is the Gospel of Jesus. What is a local Body of Christ to do?

I suggest to you that what we can do is to be deeply conscious of, and committed to, our core missions, because it is these core missions that are our faithful responses to the injustices of the world.

Ponder, if you will, one of our core missions as a church: spiritual formation. This is the deliberate, considered, conscious attempt to form, to shape, ourselves into the image of God. Lovely, pious words, those. Easy to say, hard to practice. For truly we are influenced by the horrifying news. Truly we are torn by one more terrorist blowing up children. Truly we are impacted by the graphic images we see on television. And spiritual formation is to choose to be how we will be formed: not by the injustice, but by God's response to injustice.

A local Body of Christ can also respond contextually to world's injustices by being radical in its hospitality. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook describes radical hospitality this way:

Congregations committed to breaking from the status quo are called to develop a sense of "radical hospitality." Rather than seeking out like members for mutual support, they seek people who consider themselves beyond the reach of organized religion. "Radical hospitality" has not only social, but political and economic implications; it is the act of extending community beyond the margins to those unserved by church, synagogue, or mosque. Rather than limiting their public theology to outreach or charity that maintains the unjust distribution of power and resources, congregations formed in radical hospitality exercise a commitment to justice. This model seeks to transform both the believer and society as a whole.¹

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/thecongregation/indepth/beyondoutreach.html#name>

Such radical hospitality in turn informs our outreach, which is yet one more way a local congregation such as ours can respond those very injustices that inspire the Jesuses and the Gandhis, and those same injustices that also inflame the terrorist and incite violence. When the "otherness" of the alien inflames the threatened and the hurt to seek them out to make war, a local body of Christ seeks out the alien to make peace, seeks out the other in radical hospitality. Again, we must be conscious of what we choose to shape us: anger toward the injustice, or faith in God's response.

And faith is, always, grounded in prayer, which is yet another thing we can do. This may be the most important thing of all. And lest you think that these are the typical pretentiously pious words of a typical pretentiously pious preacher, let me remind you what prayer does for us. When we pray we put ourselves ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, on the Way . . . on the Way of God's response of love. That is not pretentious. We put ourselves on and in the Way of justice, compassion, mercy and joy. In Psalm 26 we read, "Thy steadfast love is before my eyes and I walk in faithfulness to thee." Think about this a second. Think about a daily prayer discipline that puts love, not violence, before our eyes and empowers us to walk in faithfulness in that direction. That is not pretentious: not when our eyes and ears are inundated with news of terror attacks and blood on walls; not when our sense of justice is violated by violent people and rapacious greed; not when children starve to death and women are raped and genocide becomes a way of "cleansing." In prayer we put ourselves in the way of love and walk in faithfulness in that direction. That is not pretentious. And it is what you have done today. So I thank you for being here today, for choosing a morning of prayer and praise, a morning of worship and celebration, a morning of putting love before your eyes. Bless you for your trust, your faithfulness, your prayer.

All of this raises the question of the worth of these acts in the face of the injustices that assault our world. Trying to form our souls into the image of God, reaching to the margins to those who are alien, doing small acts of mercy in our own backyard, and praising and worshipping God. It all seems so puny when suicide bombers are blowing people up, when genocide devastates populations, and when over 40,000 children starve to death daily. Our local efforts can seem so paltry compared to global violence. We begin to think that our work is too small, that only the grand effort is worth our time. And I tell you, that is a lie. It is its own form of participating in the injustice surrounding us. For the world is redeemed one life at a time: each child educated at Denver Inner City Parish is our answer to the world's injustice; each orphan fed in Rwanda is our own answer to the genocide; each marginalized person who thought they were beyond the reach of organized religion and who is sought out and welcomed by this beloved community is our own answer to the prejudice that haunts humanity; our own soul formed into the image of God is our individual response to the dents of injustice. It is the love we do right here, right now, in our own backyard that changes the world, one life at a time.

In matters of justice First Plymouth has always led. In our early commitment to Denver Inner City Parish and in our stance on being Open and Affirming of gays and lesbians we were out front; we were seen as the cutting edge and even as the radical fringe. There is grace in this. But let it be known here and now, we are not finished in our commitment to justice that goes where Jesus went—to the margins; we are here to stay. And we stay here by remaining on the leading edge of worship that touches the soul, spiritual formation that shapes the character, radical hospitality that reaches the far reaches of the margins and outreach that brings in the

world's pains that they may be redeemed by God's love. This is the stewardship of the gifts we have been given. This is our response to Christ's sacrifice of himself.

And so our work as lovers of God and humanity is still working its way out. Jesus, the ultimate lover of them all, he who came to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself, he is our chosen Way, our beaten track, the true image of love we are striving attain.

Blessed be God. And blessed be God's realm, now and forever. Amen.

The Reverend George Anastos

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you willingly sacrificed yourself so that we could learn your response of love to the world's injustice. Help us to walk on your way. Just this week, O God, more men, women and children have died in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. Just this week men and women at Fort Hood were cut down. Just this week we have had invitations from the world to be shaped by its violence and its injustice. Loving God, you willingly sacrificed yourself so that we could learn to be shaped by you and your love for humanity and we pledge that we will follow you on the Way.