

**June 16, 2020
Christ the Servant
Pentecost 2
Matthew 9:35-10:8**

Two weeks ago, when I sat and watched our elected President of the United States march across a plot of land which he had just cleared of legitimate protesters by tear gassing them and shooting them with rubber bullets ... when I sat and watched our elected president stand in front of an historic Episcopal church ... when I watched him raise that bible (upside down) in an authoritarian conquering gesture ... my heart sank as deep as it could sing. Part of the reason it sank so low related closely to today's gospel and I will wind around to that. But, let me tell you why I became angry, saddened, and (truth be told), just a bit frightened.

First, if the gesture was meant to evoke law and order, it angered me that he had law and order backward. The protests were lawful. Loud...but lawful. The right of free speech is baked into the first amendment of our Constitution. The lawful marchers were protesting unlawful police brutality. It angered me that our president made an empty, awkward gesture against the protesters, not against that which they were protesting. It angered me that he was not standing in front of that church to speak against the unlawful murder of George Floyd at the hands of white police officers, or to speak out against the death of Breanna Taylor, a 26-year-old black EMT who was shot in her apartment by white police who broke in unannounced looking for a suspect who was already in custody, or to speak out against the death of Tony McDade, a black transsexual man who was shot as the white police screamed a racial epithet at him. *These* were the “unlawful” things. The protests were lawful. It angered me that he got law and order backward.

But my next reaction was dismay and despair for the harm and violence that gesture did to Christianity. Christianity, as a religion, is declining in the United States at a rapid rate. The Pew Research Center reports that, ten years ago, 77% of Americans described themselves as Christian. Today, only 65% do. Only 23% of Americans describe themselves as churchgoers. 29% say they never attend at all. 12% of Americans describe their religion as “nothing in particular.”

Many of these who have no use for religion have based their opinion of Christianity on what they see “Christians” do. And, since Christianity is based on the Bible, many of these who have no use for religion base their opinion on how they see the Bible used. Marcus Borg, a Lutheran theologian, goes so far as to claim that, “IN the last half century, probably more Christians have left the church because of the Bible than for any other single reason.” To them, Christians believe in biblical literalism – that the earth was created in 6 days or that Adam and Eve were real people. To them, Christians believe in biblical infallibility – that, if the Bible defends slavery (which it does), then it must be true. Or, if the Bible orders the subordination of women (which it does), then it must be true. To them, Christians believe in biblical absolutism: “The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it.”

Those who are leaving Christianity are post-Renaissance thinking people who believe in science, embrace evolution, and can’t reconcile what they read in Genesis or hear in church. Those of us who have more of a metaphorical or sacramental understanding of the Bible ... those of us who read the Old Testament through the filter of the New ... those of us who try and try again to proclaim the grace of God rather than the wrath – we have been trying for decades to get them to see that the way Christianity is portrayed by the Sunday televangelists or high-profile evangelicals is *not* the only way to see Christianity. We have been trying to say that it is not even a healthy way to view Christianity.

Trying to get non-believers to see the Bible in a healthy and enlightening and hopeful way has been a losing battle for us, but one we continue to fight. And so, to see, to weeks ago, our holy book held up as a prop, as a talisman over those who march against police brutality, as a symbol of authoritarianism, as a political gimmick to get votes from the evangelicals ... to see Holy Scripture used in this way ... Well, I saw that and just heard one big flushing sound. Down the commode went the very last hope we had for US to hold the Bible up by way of announcing, “THIS, this is the good news of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. THIS, this is the command to love your neighbor as yourself. THIS, this is the book which directs us to ‘Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.’ THIS, this is the book which reminds us of our baptismal covenant. This is the book which sends us out into the world as Jesus sent his disciples.

Well ... that battle may be lost. And maybe our task isn’t to proclaim the Bible. Maybe it isn’t to convince people that, well, if they just look at it in this particular way – the way we look at it – they would see it the way we do. Maybe our task isn’t to proclaim the Bible. We don’t worship a book. We worship that to which the book points ... God incarnate in the flesh of his son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Maybe our task is to proclaim what Jesus proclaimed. Remember when I said I’d get around to the gospel? Here it is. Matthew 9:35: “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.” Jesus didn’t proclaim the Bible. He quoted from it, sure. But Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and was fond of saying, “It has come near! It has come near!” And how did he proclaim it? By curing every disease, every sickness, and casting out evil spirits.

Then ... then ... (this is the best part) ... he gathered his twelve disciples and said, “Now *you* go out and do this. *You* go do what I do.” Matthew tells us that Jesus “summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.” It is then that we find out the disciples’ names: Peter, Andrew, James, John, and the others. But it is as if Jesus is reaching out over two thousand years and naming us. “You, Liam, I want you to fight the unclean spirits of the world. You, Shawnice, I want you to seek out brokenness and heal it.” And the names would be those in our congregation ... The Toms and the Marcys ... and the names would be those in our community ... and the names would especially be those who were in Lafayette Square. “Go, fix what is broken. Bring justice to the black community. Reform police procedure. Comfort those who grieve for their loved ones who were killed. Confront those in power. Change laws. Change hearts. Change minds.”

THIS is what the Kingdom looks like! THIS is what the Kingdom looks like! THIS is what the Kingdom looks like!

And so it is my hope and prayer that others may pay more attention to what Christians *do* than the doctrines they espouse or the bibles they wave. If Christianity is to have any chance of spreading and becoming strong again it will be as people see us doing what Jesus did. Those who look at us from the outside may not ever again in their lives open their bibles to the ninth chapter of Matthew from which we read this morning. They may never read or hear these words which describe what Jesus is all about But, if they are watching us, and if we are exercising authority over evil, if we are casting out the demonic in the world about us, if we are making unjust laws just, if we are healing the hurting, if we are doing the things Jesus did then they will have “read” the Bible whether they know it or not and they will have had a sermon preached to them whether

they know it or not. And maybe, just maybe, the Kingdom of God will have come near to them.

Let's close with Jesus' own words: "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." He did *not* say, "*Wave Bibles*"