

Building The Beloved Community

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 40:1-11

Matthew 5:1-17

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2nd Sunday After The Epiphany

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“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Matthew 5:13a, 14a, 17

I

It was G. K. Chesterton who coined the phrase, “America is a nation with the soul of a church.” He meant, this nation lives by certain foundational beliefs, like unto our creedal beliefs in the church. Today this identity is much needed with renewed vigor. This is an identity we as a nation need to rise to the heights to reclaim in this season of grappling with differences and commonality. This is an identity that needs civility to overshadow the polarization that is constantly spewed forth across the airwaves and internet across our nation between extremes of liberal and conservative, right and left. A nation with the soul of a church knowing who we are at the center, the core, is an identity we need in order to make real again our national motto of “e pluribus Unum,” “out of many one”, instead of the opposite that seems to be so loud and present, “out of one many,” with continuing fragmentation, stereotyping and division.

Today I wish I could just offer a word of congratulations to Auburn for winning the national football championship and let it go at that. It was awesome. Or include Alabama for winning last year and have us all feel good about the two year running streak of victory this state is blessed with. And it really is an incredible accomplishment. Maybe it is useful to say, well at least, whichever team we pull for, when it comes to outside competition, we are all Alabamians now! That gets at my point. It is important to remember in sports, in politics, in life beyond pulling for our team, our cause, our point of view, our business, we must come together as part of a larger whole. E pluribus Unum, and that more than a political slogan after an election. Hence the value of Chesterton’s quote, a nation with the soul of a church.

The famous British author actually wrote that in an essay telling a story about applying for a visa to make his first ever visit to America, and being asked on a form, “Are you an anarchist?” Pointing out that a real anarchist would never admit it, he added, in response to another question, “Are you in favor of subverting the government of the United States by force?” He said he wanted to write, “I prefer to answer that question at the end of my tour and not at the beginning.” What he wrote afterward instead was this, “America is a nation with the soul of a church.”

We who are the Church in America have to start with ourselves, and centering ourselves on those core values, with which Jesus begins his inaugural address. Being salt and light and fulfilling God’s purpose for us in this world. That is why we are here as the community of Jesus. That is the point Matthew leads us to. Matthew’s church does not

have any clout with the nation, be it Israel or Rome or Greece. For Matthew the point is not to delegate to the nation responsibilities that start with us. The point is start here, and from here be the church we are called to be, then maybe we will be tasted like salt and seen like light to point the way in the broader realm, so that the nation and even the world may rise to be what we are called to be. We the church, the community of Jesus must rise up to reclaim who we are: salt and light, following our Master Jesus as his Kingdom is being fulfilled among us, bit by bit, day by day. We must be the Beloved Community.

The United States of America is founded upon a Constitution, the introductory preamble of which defines the nation's vision of itself and the sort of citizenry it hopes to embody.¹ Recently the new U. S. House of Representatives opened its first session with a reading of the full text of the Constitution. Yesterday in Nashville I watched as an old friend was sworn in as Governor of Tennessee, as he swore to abide by and protect and defend the Constitutions both of Tennessee and of the United States of America. In a similar way, Jesus in his inaugural address on the Mountain offers his constitution, his core teachings of the movement he comes to begin.

In this preamble we call the Beatitudes he reminds his followers of nine attributes by which they are called blessed or happy. "You are blessed, you are happy when you are:

- poor in spirit,
- mourning,
- meek,
- hungering and thirsting for righteousness,
- merciful,
- pure in heart,
- a peacemaker,
- persecuted for righteousness sake,
- reviled and persecuted and falsely gossiped about on account of Jesus.

These values he lifts up - turn the world's values upside down. His is an inverted pyramid. The greatest is the servant. The getter is the giver. Then Jesus goes on to sum up: be who we are, the salt of the earth, the light of the world, following him who came, "not come to abolish the law or the prophets; but to fulfill."

It is this sense of fulfilling I am drawn to today as I ponder Chesterton's observation and our need to see our nation pull together as one as we seek to build the beloved community first here in this church, and then as we go forth to live it out in our homes and jobs and schools and neighborhoods and world.

II

My thoughts today are unusually wide-ranging, running across lots of events and lots of years. Uppermost in my mind is the tragedy in Tuscan last Saturday week, the crazed shooting spree at a shopping center by a mentally deranged individual that left 6 innocent people dead, 12 innocent people wounded, including Congresswoman Gabrielle

Gifford's, whom these American citizens had all come out on a Saturday morning to see as she made a routine visit to her constituents to listen and learn as she sought to lead.

Overlaid upon that event is the memory of so many other tragic acts of violence, across our lifetimes - many like this one, carried out by imbalanced isolated individuals, that have yet shaped and changed our nation. Columbine, Virginia Tech, Oklahoma City, Dallas, Memphis, and our own Birmingham come to mind, where off balanced individuals or small groups of hate-filled extremists have turned to violence. And of course, violence is not limited to this nation. Similar imbalanced extremists perpetrated violence on Anwar Sadat, Yitzhak Rabin, and Pope John Paul 2. I remember standing in Sarajevo, Bosnia, on the street corner where the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand was shot by a Bosnian nationalist while riding in an open car. This event escalated into World War I with millions of deaths across Europe and nothing fundamentally accomplished other than the seeds planted for World War II.

I am thinking as well, on this Sunday before the only national holiday named for an individual American, "Martin Luther King, Jr. Day," of the nonviolent movement for civil rights he led, of the hopes that were raised, dashed in his assassination, and yet realized even though not yet completely, through this Baptist minister from Alabama who found himself at the center of a movement calling for all people in this nation and in this world to be measured by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. It has been a long and difficult road from slavery to equality, to (for one family) the White House.

I thought of the changes that have occurred in my own lifetime. The South into which I was born in 1955 was a segregated society with separate schools, motels, movie theatre seating. The Rialto Theater in El Dorado, Arkansas had a separate side entrance by which black patrons entered that took them straight to the balcony, unseen by us white children. We even had a separate Laundromat in our little town. I walked home from segregated Hugh Goodwin Elementary School in the early 1960's past a Laundromat that had a sign in the window that read, "White Only." I naively thought it was referring to the color of clothes, not the color of people accepted as customers. When I was in the 3rd grade my school began to integrate one additional grade each year, until the old "separate but equal" lie was over. Change was taking place and our own children grew up in Kentucky in their formative years, with black and white friends together for birthday parties and sleepovers. A long slow transformation was under way, though still not yet fully realized. It was necessary. It was right. It was what justice demanded.

I am thinking as well of the inauguration yesterday in Nashville, of my longtime friend, housemate and groomsman, Bill Haslam, as Governor of Tennessee. An office he assumes, interestingly, exactly 40 years after that office was filled by a man I greatly admire, Gayle's father, Dr. Winfield Dunn, who had been a dentist in Memphis, and thinking how in these two good capable men of integrity - the potential for good sound leadership in this nation rises anew..

I think back over what has changed in my life, our lives, over those past 40 years, a number, remember, of biblical proportions. Over 40 years Israel lived into their new identity no longer slaves but free. I think of grief and disappointment, of hope and opportunity, of where we have come from and where we are going in this nation and of our responsibility as the church to be the headlights, and not, as we too often have been, the taillights of the nation. You are salt. You are fulfilling light. I think of this mix of good and evil that are part of our daily experience, and of the promise, which our faith calls us to live out.

Tension between Good and Evil has been with us since The Garden of Eden. Martin Luther King, Jr. noted in a sermon given in 1956 in New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine,

“There seems to be a tension at the very core of the universe. All the great religions have seen this tension at the center of life. Hinduism called it a conflict between illusion and reality; Zoroastrianism looked upon it as a tension between the god of light and the god of darkness; Platonism called it a conflict between spirit and matter; traditional Judaism and Christianity called it a conflict between God and Satan. Each of these religions recognized that in the midst of the upward climb of goodness there is the down pull of evil.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus begins with his little band of followers up on the mountain and calls them upward. He stands within the tradition of Judaism. In this address, as Matthew has compiled these core teachings, Jesus is portrayed as the New Moses. Moses on the Mountaintop had been given the Law of God. Now in Jesus that law has a new center and focus, a brightness and a broadness. As Tom Long notes,

“In Christ the law becomes both a searchlight and a laser. When the law passes through the person and event of Christ it is both focused and enlarged, its potential to illumine and to guide human life both amplified and intensified.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What Jesus is offering in his inaugural to this little band is the opportunity to actualize the ideal. To make real the righteousness and justice Moses and the prophets had pointed Israel to. Jesus is saying, now in me you can actually do this. Getting there will not be easy. It will not come simply through mountaintop inspiration. It will require finally his self-offering sacrifice on the Cross and his victory in the Resurrection. But through the suffering the glory will come. God's Kingdom, which is beyond our earthly Kingdoms, is yet beginning and growing among us now. Good and evil are not equal opponents. Truth is marching on and goodness will win out in the long run. That is not simply a religious but a historical principle. Evil ultimately falters and falls.

III

Here is the really important take-home message of what happened last Saturday in Tucson. Not that a crazed individual burst forth in violence, (horrible as that was) but that ordinary citizens stepped forward to stop him heroically reflecting the real values and character of the people of this nation. Interestingly at least four of the six persons shot

and killed, and perhaps more, were people of faith who had built their lives on these teachings of Jesus. John Roll, a Federal Judge was on his way home from Saturday morning Mass. An elderly lady, Phyllis Schneck, was active in a Tucson Presbyterian Church. Dorwan Stoddard, an older man, who died shielding his wife with his own body, was a daily volunteer at a Church of Christ. And then there was the precious little nine year old girl, Christina Taylor Green, born on 9-11, who wanted to meet her congresswoman and participate in her government; she had just been elected to her school student council and sang in her church choir.

It strikes me that the beloved community actually is being quietly, steadily built up around us block by block by such people. These citizens reflected the salt and light qualities Jesus calls for. They reflected meekness and righteousness and purity of heart. They were peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness sake, reviled by a maniac. They were blessed.

And we, as we build up our inner core from putting into practice these teachings of Jesus, from putting into practice the words of the prophet Micah by doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God, we become part of this vast invisible army of decent citizens and people of faith who are the real strength of this great nation. And the invisible becomes visible. Awful as these tragedies are, they can become occasions for good to come.

Last week, in a book I got for Christmas, I ran across an address by the late conservative columnist and editor William Buckley. In it he reflected on a debate he was part of in Nashville at my alma mater, Vanderbilt University in 1968, only two weeks after Martin Luther King, Jr. had been shot a short little ways down the road in Memphis. Buckley had been asked to debate the civil rights activist Julian Bond, a former president of the NAACP. In that raw moment so soon after Dr. King's tragic assassination, Julian Bond had told those 6,000 Vanderbilt students packed into Memorial Gymnasium, "I am filled with shame and loathing for our race." William Buckley responded, saying,

"The sea, (the writer) Conrad observes – is the enemy. But it is the irresistible enemy. The sea is the creature, which, at the margin, can drown the sailor. But however tempestuous, however arbitrary, however sullen the sea can be,... the sea maintains its basic integrity; and if the sailor observes the rules, if he maintains his guard, he is permitted to survive: and the experience is sublime.

I feel that we should be grateful, whatever our differences, to be facing the sea – this enemy- in this bark (boat). I do believe that the time is overdue to profess our continuing faith in this country and in its institutions.

More significant by far than the ghastly murders of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King – more significant by far is the spontaneous universal grief of a community. That is the response. The salient datum in America – not that we bred the aberrant assassins of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, but that we bred the most widely shared and the most intensely felt sense of grief: such grief

over the loss of Mr. Kennedy and Mr. King as is felt over the loss of one's own sons.”^{iv}

We've experienced that same sort of grief over the Tucson tragedy. You and I have lived through tempestuous years, great progress, depressing setbacks. Our current challenges in this nation are immense as we look to issues like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the immense choking national debt, border issues, immigration, guns and gun control. But what defines us, as followers of Jesus, and as citizens of this land, is not the violent destroyer but the civil and civilizing person of salt and light who is part of God's work begun in Jesus Christ being slowly fulfilled. So let it be fulfilled, and let it be fulfilled in us, until the Kingdoms of this world become the Kingdoms of our God, and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever, and ever and ever. Amen.

ⁱ Tom Long, Matthew, p.46.

ⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore", Sermon delivered at Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving, Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York, NY May 17, 19656.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Long, *ibid.* p. 54

^{iv} William Buckley, Let Us Talk Of Many Things, p.122.