

Torn Apart, Pieced Together

Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53

Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension Sunday (May 29) 2022

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*The time of words is over ... Being Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be borne anew out of this prayer and action.*

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*The love of God exposes our modern nations for what they are – simple fabricated containers for the rich multiplicity of peoples who each and every one are beloved creatures of the Creator God. The disciples of Jesus are called to reach into this rich multiplicity (Luke 24:47) and like quilters joining beautiful fragments of cloth, invite a weaving together of peoples within nations and beyond them as well.*

-Willie James Jennings

I started this sermon three times this week. First, because today is Ascension Sunday, the sermon was going to be on that – the Ascension. But then, on Monday, the Southern Baptist Convention released its report on sexual abuse revealing the shocking number of cover-ups by powerful preachers with their complicity of lies and deceit and abuse. Incredible. And we thought we had heard it all with the corruption in high places by the Roman Catholic Church. The Southern Baptists are right up there. So, my second sermon start was going to talk about the Southern Baptist sexual abuse and cover-up.

But then Uvalde came. And everything else pales. Everything else like the grass which withers away. What do we say? What do we do? How do we act?

Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi prison, said, “The time of words is over...”

That’s how I feel. Politicians in Washington and Austin, especially Austin, in obedience to the rich and powerful gun lobby, continually ignore and block basic gun control restrictions, and make excuses as our children are put in harm’s way. Meanwhile, the elected politicians wave the Bible with one hand while waving their guns with the other and the White nationalist church shouts god, guns, and guts is what made America great...

Oh, God, our heart and soul are torn apart by the shock and grief and suffering.

J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield famously said, “Old Jesus would have puked.” This week I think Jesus puked. And I think Jesus wept.

Bonhoeffer believed the church in Nazi Germany had so compromised itself in the interest of power and nationalism that it no longer had anything to say. They no longer had any integrity that allowed them to speak... “The time of words is over.” It was true in 1944 and it is true in 2022. We should weep. God have mercy.

Bonhoeffer went on to finish his thought by saying, “Our being a Christian today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action.”

Prayer and righteous action. Action which is right, which is just. The just thing. Prayer and do the right thing.

Interestingly enough, in our text today from the first chapter of Acts, Jesus tells the disciples much the same thing. Before you go out and say anything, you'd better have something to say and make sure it's rooted and shaped by the Holy Spirit. And before you go out and do anything, you need to know what to do and how to do it. If you seek the right and just action, make sure it is right and just according to the standards of the Living Christ. So, Jesus says go and wait. Wait (Acts 1:4). Acts says a little further that they waited and prayed – wait and pray and pray and wait. Get yourself ready. Get centered, rooted, prepared because the promised Holy Spirit is coming. Theologian Willie Jennings comments that from this first chapter of Acts until the last chapter, everything thing the disciples say and everything they do, no matter how mundane, is done in waiting and prayer (*Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible – Acts*, Willie James Jennings, pp. 36-37).

Prayer precedes righteous action says Bonhoeffer. Jesus says, before you do anything else, wait and pray.

The book of Luke and the book of Acts are seasons 1 and 2 of the same story of the Living God invading this system of Death and Domination in order to bring about a new Way of Life and Light, healing and hope. Luke, Season 1 of the story, ends with Jesus' final instructions and then his ascension to heaven. And Acts Season 2 of the story, begins with a recap of the last episode, told a little differently.

So here the disciples are gathered around Jesus out on the edge of Jerusalem while he gives his last instructions telling them to wait and pray. Right off, the first thing the disciples ask Jesus shows us how much work is yet to be done by the coming Holy Spirit. The disciples ask, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). Is now the time when you take control and rule? We’ve been waiting for this since the time of King David. Now, we’re ready for you to make Israel great again.

Theologian Willie Jennings says this is the “nationalist question: When will we rule our land?” (*Acts*, p.17). “When will we take Israel back and bring order?” Jennings says that no doubt they asked this question with the assumption that their rule would be for the good of the world and the good of the people. And he goes on to say that nationalism is and has been a chronic temptation of the Christian church and the people of God, especially whenever we think we’ve got some power. Now we can do some good, Jesus. Let’s get to work making Israel great again.

Jennings says that this temptation of nationalism is understandable and compelling because people who have been beaten down, beaten up, left out, and marginalized are tired. He says, “The greater the number of wounds inflicted on a people, the greater the fantasy dreams of being self-determined and wielding power over others, and power to control our own destiny. It drives the creation of walled communities, border patrols, and checkpoints and turns violence and segregation into the proper exercise of the state’s right to life” (*Acts*, p. 17).

He says that nationalism interprets people as group sameness in control of their land and resources. Nationalism assumes zero-sum calculations, where we win by controlling our borders and/or controlling our identities, or we lose by

being over-run with immigrants who confuse identities and resist assimilation (p. 21).

Let me make an aside and remind us that the temptation to be in control of the political state has been with us from the beginning in the Gospels and Acts, or at least the temptation to have the power of the state to support or partner with the church. This is especially true since 313 when Constantine became the first so-called Christian emperor. It's also why the sixteenth century Anabaptists and the seventeenth century baptists were considered radicals, extremists, and threats to society. Our ancestors said that we do not need nor want the power of the state. We speak up and speak out, we are witnesses of the gospel, but we stand against any type of Christian nationalism.

Nationalism is a drive to impose a kind of order and underlying any such imposed order is the use or threat of violence. It's why guns are so much a part of American White Christian Nationalism. And it is why we've heard so much defense of God, guns, and America this week.

Samuel Perry, a sociologist at the University of Oklahoma, wrote this week in *Time*, "Guns are practically an element of worship in the church of white Christian nationalism. Gun rights thus must be defended at all costs." He went on, "Religions generally regard sacred objects as untouchable. And within the religion of white Christian nationalism, guns are as much a part of our identity as Christianity. Wednesday morning, Rep. Brian Babin, a Texas Republican, told a *Newsmax* interviewer "The United States of America has always had guns. It's our history. We were built on the Judeo-Christian

foundation and with guns” (see Samuel L. Perry, *Time*, May 25, 2022, “Guns are the Religion of the Right”).

In all my years as a pastor, I have never seen anything like the power and addiction that guns have on people. I believe that guns are both an addiction and an idol. It has to do with power and control, and much of it is connected with the rush one gets when picking up and using guns.

As a pastor for over 40 years, the angriest I’ve seen people have primarily been around two things: messing with the American flag in the sanctuary of a church and criticizing people’s guns. People have never gotten angry with me over the doctrine of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, or whether there is a cross in the sanctuary. But they will fight over the American flag and guns.

That’s called idolatry. It’s what we worship and give our lives to. Idolatry is about worshiping false gods that promise Life but all they deliver is Death. They are portents of Death and sacraments of Death. Just as we believe that God works through everyday material things like water and bread to bring about grace and love and mercy in ways we don’t even understand, guns are sacraments of Death that bring Darkness and Destruction. Guns as idols reveal our deepest allegiances. And I remind you that Martin Luther said back in the mid-1500’s, you show me what you sacrifice your children to, and I’ll show you what you worship.

So back here in the very first chapter of Acts, the disciples mean well, but they’re assuming a completely different understanding of the work of

Jesus Christ and what will become the church. The entire book of Acts is about the struggle, the pain and conflict and disagreement, these disciples undergo as they are converted, changed, and transformed about who they are called to be and how they are to live.

First off, remember Jesus tells them to go wait. To wait, means give up power and give up control. Let it go. It's about patience, and patience helps deal with anger. Hear me clearly, there are things we should be angry about! And the lack of gun control is one of them! Children dying because of the politicians bow to the idol of guns should make us angry. Anger is a motivator and should get us up each day determined we're going to do something about gun violence. We're going to write letters, every single day, organize, pray, and do more. But part of waiting and prayer is learning how to direct our anger in the right and just way and not allowing anger to turn us into part of the problem. Anger must work hand in hand with patience.

And patience works hand in hand with hope. Not hope in nationalism and not hope in guns. Not hope we can control the outcome, no matter how good we think our outcome might be. Our hope is in the Living God known in Jesus Christ, who shows us another way. So we wait and hope for the coming of God's Holy Spirit, who will not only empower us but will guide us and change us.

Secondly, notice that Jesus tells them they will be his "witnesses" (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8). To be a witness of Jesus Christ means to speak out and speak up and live and embody the Way of Jesus, and then let the chips fall where they may. We do not control the outcome. We do not coerce

people. We do not use force, bulldozers, tanks, guns, or yell and bully. We do not manipulate or propagandize. We say and do the gospel and let it go, trusting the Holy Spirit is at work.

We are witnesses. And we can be good and faithful witnesses or bad and unfaithful witnesses. The news from the Southern Baptist Convention earlier this week about sexual abuse and the cover-up by the high and mighty is about bad and unfaithful witnesses.

By the way, did you know that our own Marilyn and Joe Richardson were doing research on sexual abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention back in the early 1990's? In 1993 Marilyn wrote a research paper on it for Belmont University in Nashville but did not get any help at all from the SBC.

Furthermore, Jesus says we are to be his witnesses to all nations in Luke 24:47 and in Acts Jesus says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). All nations, the ends of the earth. In other words, not one nation. The mission of the church is to cross borders, cross national boundaries and wherever and whatever divides people from God and from each other, proclaiming the gospel that in Christ is the love that unites and heals and repairs, and makes all things new.

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*Jesus are called to reach into this rich multiplicity (Luke 24:47) and like quilters joining beautiful fragments of cloth, invite a weaving together of peoples within nations and beyond them as well. (Acts, p. 22).*

Instead of being covered over by someone's controlling sameness and uniformity, the church of Jesus Christ is a different image. Like a patchwork quilt, we are pieced together by love.

Anne Tyler writes in her 1998 novel *A Patchwork Planet* of an elderly woman, Mrs. Alford, working on a quilt for what seemed like years. Finally, the narrator gets to see it and says, *I'd heard about that planet quilt often, but I'd never seen it. What I had pictured was a kind of fabric map – a plaid Canada, a gingham U.S. Instead, the circle was made up of mismatched squares of cloth no bigger than postage stamps, joined by the uneven black stitches of a woman whose eyesight was failing. Planet Earth, in Mrs. Alford's version, was makeshift and hap-hazard, clumsily, cobbled together, overlapping, and crowded and likely to fall into pieces at any moment (p. 261).*

That's the church. That's us. By the standards of a White Nationalistic church we're haphazard and clumsily cobbled together, overlapping and crowded and might fall to pieces at any moment. But by the standards of Jesus, we're the very people God loves working with, partly because we're under no illusions that we're in charge. We know we're not. We hope and pray God is!

Jesus says we are to wait and pray. Wait and pray and power will come to us. And you and I both know that we're going to need all the power of the Resurrected Christ through Holy Spirit we can get.

Our friend, Ryon Price, the pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, who visited us a couple of months ago reminds me, that the word “resurrection” originally meant “uprising” in the ancient world.

The Resurrection of Christ is an uprising of Life and Light in the middle of the systems of Death and Darkness. We are witnesses of that uprising. And while we have had our hearts torn apart and ripped from our souls this week, by the patient work of the Holy Spirit, God uses us to lovingly piece together all sorts of people with one another, bring healing and repair, hope and wholeness.

Let it be so.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.