

Sermons at Christ Church

Lord, Make Me An Instrument Of Your Peace.

Pentecost 3

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Today's gospel places a heavy burden on us—inviting us to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel with the good news. I wonder why the disciples were asked not to go to Gentile enclaves or to the Samaritans but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Today, we are being sent like sheep into the midst of wolves. I wonder who the wolves are. But I suspect that they are those—members of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, who know better but who for their own selfish reasons reject what they know and persecute those who draw their attention to what they know.

It is to these wolves that Jesus is sending us with the good news. Alas, the good news that disturbs the peace of the wolves. According to the gospel, when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The wolves have sapped every energy of the sheep. The wolves have taken everything they could take from the sheep. The wolves have drained every drop of blood they could from the sheep.

The helplessness and the haplessness of the sheep has created a bountiful harvest but there are not enough laborers, and not only that but the laborers are afraid of the wolves and so cannot speak out and stand up for what is right.

Today's gospel invites you to be a new laborer. That laborer who uses the power of the good news to fight for what is right. A new laborer who refuses to let the fear of persecution weigh heavily on his or her decision to pursue what is right and honorable. A new laborer who doesn't allow the fear of harassment cripple what they know to be good. A new laborer who stands up to be heard and so gives room for the faith to be bigger than any fear they may have. A new laborer who believes that it isn't he/she who defends himself/herself but it is the Holy Spirit who defends them.

On this Juneteenth and Father's Day morning, you got to be a new laborer because the harvest is not only plentiful but people are helpless and tired of the wolves of our day. People need the good news which awakens in us the desire for something good about life. The wolves of our day want us to believe that they understand the gospel much better than everyone else. The wolves of our day want us to believe that the good news of Jesus Christ requires of them to subjugate others. The wolves of our day want us to believe that others are subservient to them.

Heaven knows that I am no Baptist. I don't have a blood of Baptist in me. But it is strange that in 2023, some Baptists would vote to deny leadership positions for women in the church. As to how the good news of Jesus Christ makes this possible is beyond me. As to why the good news of Jesus Christ makes this even sensible surprises me. But these are the wolves of our time. And it is for this reason that we need new laborers.

Today's gospel story isn't about peace or unity or some kumbaya. Jesus says to the twelve, brother will betray brother, a father his child and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death-this is serious stuff. Your foes will be from your own household. Those with whom you break bread will rise against you.

This is because the new laborer will have to stand up and counter any narrative that seeks to place more value on the sparrow than your fellow man or woman. The new laborer would have to stand up and challenge any story that seeks to injure the dignity of another person.

The new laborer would have to rise up, and beginning from their own household offer a compelling vision of a future rooted in the power of the good news which makes new life possible. The new laborer makes enemies in his or her own home because they stand on the good news and to decide to reject all that which is not of God. The new laborer decides to reject the caricature into which Blacks have been turned into since the first enslaved Africans arrived at the shores of Jamestown, Virginia, in the summer of 1619.

Since that summer, Africans were brought to this beautiful land in the millions. The tragedy is that right from the very beginning, Africans were not considered to be fully human-with dignity and grace.

We have lived with this misconception for centuries and we still have wolves among us who know what is right but yet believe and perpetuate this nonsense. The task of the new laborer is to turn this tragedy around with the power of the good news-the good news which awakens in each soul the desire for a dignified life.

I have shared this story before. My former Rector told me a story about a parishioner who decided not to honor his pledge. The Rector had called the parishioner to remind him about his pledge because he had not paid for some time. The Rector knew that he was an honorable faithful man. But when he called, this is what the honorable parishioner told him “I am not going to pay the pledge.” He said. “Why. What happened?” Asked the bemused Rector. “I am not paying because you brought a Black man on staff.” His jaw dropped. He knew him to be an honorable man. He knew him to be a faithful man but he didn’t know him to be racist. The shocked Rector simply replied. “Thank you very much. We will do just fine.”

This is how you create enemies in your own household, your friends and colleagues. You set yourself against any narrative that places more value on a sparrow than a human being. You reject any narrative that diminishes another person because the good news of Jesus Christ has set you free. And because you are free, you believe that each person is born free and needs to be free and to live free. Because of the good news you decide to become a new laborer because your faith is bigger than your fear.

My former Rector rejected the bigotry of a Christian man who shared the same baptism with Christ, the Rector and myself, the person he sought to denigrate with his money. I have such a deep and abiding respect for this priest because he did not fall into the trap of having to choose between money and dignity. He did not allow himself to buy into a destructive narrative which perpetrated a myth about the inferiority of African Americans. He stood up to a man for whom Black lives were not even worth his faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He stood up for a Race and a people who have suffered for so long simply because of the color of their skin.

He is one new laborer who understood what it meant for your faith to be bigger than your fear. More than that he understood that the good news is meant to awaken in each dark heart the desire for the light that overcomes all darkness.

Jesus said, whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. To take up the cross is to be committed to the vision of the one who calls us to lose our lives for his sake. To take up the cross is to be a new laborer who believes in the transformative power of the good news, stands committed to advocate for it and works as hard as to bring this transformation to others.

Remember the day when you became a father-whether by the traditional way or by adoption. You became a new laborer. You held in your child in your arms and all you wanted to do was to whisper in the ear of that child how much you loved him or her. And throughout the child's life, you've worked, as a new laborer to live out the love that you first expressed to that child.

Today, this Father's Day or Fathering Day-because we know there are those who play father figures in the lives of others and there are women who play the role of both mother and father. As old a laborer as you may be, I invite you to be a new laborer who stands up for the good news like a father who stands up for his children.

Like a dutiful father, I invite you to begin the walk of a new laborer, where your motivation is grounded in awakening in each child the beauty of God's love. Like a father who roots for his kid no matter what, I invite you to be the one who stands up against the wolves of our time, knowing that your faith is bigger than your fear-and no amount of persecution would be enough.

I learned these wise words from Eugene Peterson *"Anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal."* Many are the helpless sheep among us and I think it is about time you become a new laborer who awakens in each soul the zest for life, the pursuit of love, the desire for justice and an embrace of the good news which upends the wishes of the wolves of our time-because your faith is greater than your fear. Amen.