

A Moment of Silence Is Not Enough

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

June 19, 2016

But Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." (Luke 8:38b-39a)

I don't want to fritter away precious sermon time but let me simply say that I am most grateful to Session for enabling me to take the trip of a lifetime. For more than a week I was disconnected from the rest of the world with no Internet or phone service. We were on a well provisioned boat bobbing in the South Pacific traveling back and forth across the equator. For this brief period our concerns were limited to the 30 or so folks who lived on that boat in rather close but certainly adequate proximity. Mostly we were concerned with being at the right place at the right time so as not to miss our next journey into earth's time machine. Our biggest concerns were which entrée to order for dinner, motion sickness, a wasp sting or three and a few scraped limbs.

It occurred to me that it wasn't so long ago that life for most of us was more like that. Our worlds were more narrowly and more locally defined than they are today. Having said all that let me say how good it is to be standing in this pulpit looking at all of you. I am mindful of the gift I have been given in serving you.

That dream-like state was shattered as soon as we arrived at the first airport in our journey home and our phones buzzed and dinged as we connected to the Internet. We soon learned that another hate-based massacre was underway in Florida where a third of my shipmates were heading home. Scrolling down we learned of a young child that had been drowned by an alligator at Disney World and as we arrived home we learned that a member of the British Parliament had been shot and stabbed to death. We live in an age where the non-stop news cycle connects us to the tragedy of every town across the globe. The cumulative impact can be quite weighty.

My first reaction to reports of the slaughter in Orlando was that this single event seemed to touch on every political hot-button of the day. Omar Mateen, the alleged murderer, exhibited no real religious convictions, nevertheless he pledged allegiance to ISIS while calmly making a call to 911 just before his killing rampage began. Mateen was an American, born in New York to Afghani parents. Remarkably, he worked as an armed security guard for nearly a decade. Mateen was a bit of a loner who lacked social skills and had a history of abuse to

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women. Although he may have been gay himself, he targeted a gay nightclub on Latino night where he had been more than once. LGBTQ, Islamophobia, immigration, emotional disorders, background checks, gun control, sexual violence. Every political hot button seems to have been pushed so hard the hate mongers can't figure out where to direct their vitriol. Life in the South Pacific was so far removed from all this deadly hatred and blame making!

As the media machinery caught its breath, we were reminded that it all took place within days of the first anniversary of the tragic killings at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, S.C. Jill Duffield, a resident of S.C. and the editor of Presbyterian Outlook provided a painful reminder in the prayer she wrote in response to Orlando, that the litany of mass shootings in our very recent memory is tragically long. She offered a prayer for "The LGBTQ community in Orlando, Florida; students in Blacksburg, Virginia; the children in Newtown, Connecticut; the moviegoers in Aurora, Colorado; the co-workers in San Bernardino, California; the

church goes in Charleston, South Carolina: each one's story is not repeatable, each one's gifts not replaceable, each one's loss irreparable."

One of the first articles I read after plugging back into my digital domain, concerned Connecticut Congressman Jim Himes who is an elder in his Presbyterian Church near Newtown, CT. This is not Connecticut Senator Christopher Murphy, who orchestrated the so-called filibuster pushing modest gun reform to the top of the agenda. We owe Connecticut our gratitude this week! Elder Himes had just previewed a documentary about the 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook elementary school when he learned about the worst mass shooting in American history. As reported in Slate magazine he was "Consumed by "an immense feeling of frustration," and "began tweeting a remarkable and righteous jeremiad against the "Moments of Silence" that have become the standard response by Congress to mass shootings." He lashed out at his fellow Congressman and compatriot Senators who simply paused for a Moment of Silence every time a mass shooting occurred but did nothing legislatively to address the problem. We have been reminded that in the four years since Sandy Hook there have been 1,000 deaths as a result of mass shootings and Congress has done nothing. There has been no legislation to limit access to guns, require background checks, or ban the sale of assault weapons. Pausing for a Moment of Silence to honor those who died at "fill-in-the-blank" is no longer acceptable to Rep. Jim Himes of CT. How about you?

As Himes tweeted:

The Moments of Silence in the House have become an abomination. God will ask you, "How did you keep my children safe?" Silence.

"God will ask you why you did not defer to the will of the people as children poured out their blood. And we will answer with silence." Lastly, he tweeted, "If whatever God you worship is in fact a God of love and peace you had better use the Moment of Silence to pray for our souls."

As I did my best to reflect on the readings from this week's lectionary while rocking back and forth in our brief moments of quiet time I was having difficulty connecting them in a meaningful way. But in processing the horror at the Pulse nightclub and reading Rep. Himes tweets, it began to come into focus. The message seems to be that God is trying to break the bonds of emotional torment and legalism that constrain us from speaking out; from speaking the truth wherever it is abused so that we may grow into our best selves. God is breaking the chains and shackles so that we might more fully obey God's commandment to love; to love God, to love our neighbor and even to love our enemy.

Luke tells us that Jesus healed the Gerasene demoniac who was as frightening and intimidating as an unarmed person can be. The outcast who was chained to the walls of a cave says his name is Legion. When Legion realizes that he has been loosed from the bonds of his disorder he begs to join the entourage so that he might be with Jesus. But Jesus sends him away saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

William Barclay spells it out for us: "Very naturally Legion wanted to come with Jesus but Jesus sent him home. Christian witness, like Christian charity, begins at home. It would be so much easier to live and speak for Christ among people who do not know us. But it is our duty, where Christ has set us, there to witness for him. And if it should happen that we are the only Christian in the shop, the office, the school, the factory, the circle in which we live or work, that is not a matter for lamentation. It is a challenge in which God says, 'Go and tell the people you meet every day what I have done for you'" (The New Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke).

Similarly, Elijah, having just orchestrated the showdown between God and Baal atop Mount Carmel has had to run for his life to escape the deadly wrath of Jezebel. He takes refuge in a cave where God finds him with his face wrapped in his mantle. The Lord speaks to him in his silence. God asks, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah answers in modern parlance, "I'm trying to save my

neck." But the Lord says "No, no I have work yet for you to do; now be on your way to Damascus."

In a related way, Paul tells the Galatians that they have been loosed from the bondage of the law. Through Christ we have been freed from divisions of race, economic status, gender, and may I add two millennia later, creed that we may recognize each other as children of God. As Paul writes we are all Abraham's offspring. In the political chaos and diatribe of this election cycle it is worth recalling that all *three* Abrahamic faiths are heirs of the patriarch who first heard God's voice telling him to leave his home in Ur to claim a land that God would provide. Set free, God tells us we have work to do!

The question we must ask ourselves is what are the bonds that restrain us? Why are we content with Moments of Silence? Why are we more comfortable hanging out in the caves of our Facebook avatars than actually being in community with others? Do we wish to avoid confrontation and argument with neighbors, colleagues, or family? Have we not spent the energy and time trying to examine various points of view to gain insight into God's will? Do we think ourselves too insignificant as a party of one to make a difference?

Yesterday I joined a small group to watch a telecast of the opening worship at GA, our denomination's biannual gathering, underway in Portland, Oregon. Several thousand attendees gathered in the local arena for a reaffirmation of baptismal vows, the installation of more than 1,600 commissioners, worship, and communion. In his sermon, Heath Rada, the outgoing Moderator, acknowledged that there are significantly different points of view that have been dividing the church for at least a generation. But he cited a number of examples that gave him great hope for a church that can love one another as children of God despite differences in perspective; that can continue to work together to answer the call that God makes of each one of us. These periods of transition that we experience in our legislatures and churches are painful and at times seem intractable. We must continually remind ourselves that God is breaking the shackles that hold

us back so that we might move forward in peace respecting one another's journey to live life fully as God intends.

Frederick Buechner reminds us that "Prophets have always been strident and a little crazy. They've needed to be. The prophet Deborah wouldn't have beaten the tar out of the Canaanites by issuing directives from her living room any more than Moses would've gotten his people out of Egypt writing letters to the *New York Times*."

I think God calls us all to be prophets, with a lowercase p, especially in times like these. The political rhetoric in Europe and the United States has been tragically irresponsible, ill-informed, and deadly. Most commentators have labeled this angry rant as populism. Robert Westbrook writing in *Christian Century* believes that "since America's founding, American elites, particularly economic elites, have been engaged in a concerted and largely successful effort to circumscribe and blunt the Democratic possibilities of American politics." He asserts that the founding fathers laid out "an institutional framework in which the popular power is carefully minimized and no formal institutions are provided for its direct exercise." Westbrook labels this the *Democratic Deficit*. In other words, the wealth gap and the power gap are built in to the Constitution. When the pendulum swings too far in the direction of the "haves" there is turbulence; sometimes destabilizing turbulence.

Our role as emancipated Christians is to fully engage in that pendulum correction in a passionate but responsible way. Our role is to be thoughtful and well informed in the agora or public space without being blinded to the fact that the person we are speaking to is God's creation; a child of God; one of Abraham's offspring; and heir according to the promise. These days, that can be a tall order. But our creator God expects nothing less than wherever we find ourselves we declare how much God has done for us.

Amen