

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA

Proper 7, Year A, June 25, 2017

The Rev. Bill Queen

“The Cost of Christian Living”

Matthew 10:24-39; *Book of Common Prayer* Baptismal Covenant (pages 304-305)

imagine that we are here, inside our church, which is filled to capacity, and it is night; outside is the noise of thousands of people, yelling obscenities -- at us; bricks are thrown that break through our stained glass windows; and after that, tear gas is thrown in, requiring us men, women, and children to cover our faces and try to breathe through the stinging gas; where could such a thing happen?; in a foreign country where Christians are persecuted by peoples of another faith?; in a godless communist country?

no, what I'm describing happened right here in America, in Montgomery Alabama, on May 21st, 1961; the church was First Baptist; the pastor was the Rev. Ralph Abernathy; and inside were the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr and 1,500 people, many of whom were Freedom Riders; they were people who rode busses throughout the South, not to change the laws of segregation, but to monitor whether the laws against segregation that had already been enacted were being enforced -- and, of course, they were not; outside the church were some 3,000 angry white people, all ostensibly Christian, who, had it not been for the arrival of the Alabama National Guard, would have likely killed some of those African-American Christians inside, as happened in other places; why were they angry?; because those folks inside were working to overturn the system of white supremacy that was supported by many churches, supported by state and local governments, and supported by many of the white people in the south

and incidents like this didn't just happen in Alabama or in Mississippi; the Rev. Grady Powell's autobiography recounts his experience one night, right here in Petersburg, at Gillfield Baptist Church, while his congregation was at worship inside, they discovered that the KKK was burning a cross against the wall of the church

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth: I have not come to bring peace, but a sword;” this doesn't sound like Jesus, does it?

this doesn't sound like the person who is elsewhere known as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6) and who said, "blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9); these words about a sword seem contrary to Jesus' coming to earth for the purpose of bringing salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation; but Jesus also came so that God's will would be done on earth, as it is in heaven

our mental disconnect with this passage comes, in part, because we mistake what sounds like a prescription on Jesus' part -- that he is saying such discord is the way it should be, for what is actually a description -- that he is describing how he and his disciples are going to be treated; he is giving a warning; he is preparing them for the worst; and time will prove that the worst did befall him and his disciples, with almost all of them being killed for their spreading the word about Jesus

there have been periods throughout history, and places today, where Christians face great persecution, hardships, even death, because of their faith; the years of the Civil Rights movement are one such example, for Martin Luther King Jr was constantly trying to keep the Civil Rights movement non-violent, to turn the other cheek, no matter how much violence was brought against him and against others in the movement; there was a cost for those who stood up for what was right, in Jesus' name; there will always be a cost for any Christian who tries to "take up the cross and follow" Jesus; there will always be a cost for living, truly, as a Christian; we can see some of these costs addressed in the Baptismal Covenant, in the specific things we have promised to do, as committed Christians, as a response to God's great gifts to us

we have promised in our Baptismal Covenant to "repent and return to the Lord whenever we fall into sin;" that costs us admitting to ourselves, to others, and to God when we've made mistakes; that costs us apologizing to people we've wronged -- are we willing to pay that cost?

we have promised in our Baptismal Covenant to "proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ;" this is the same as what Jesus says in today's gospel, "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops;" that costs us the luxury of being quiet and private about our faith; that costs us the effort to speak up about our faith and to live it out in a way that is obvious to everyone around us -- are we willing to pay that cost?

we have promised in our Baptismal Covenant to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves;” that costs us the right to think of ourselves and of ‘our kind of people,’ whoever that may be, as better than others; that costs us the right to look out for ourselves more than we look out for others; that costs us the obligation to continue working to right the inherited inequalities of racism and segregation that persist in Petersburg, in Richmond, in Virginia, and throughout our country to this day, in housing, in schooling, in employment, in home ownership, and in so many other factors -- are we willing to pay that cost?

and finally, we have promised in our Baptismal Covenant to “strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being;” that costs us the ability to ignore the injustices and indignities that are, unfortunately, still quite prevalent in our society today, whether they are committed by individuals, by groups, by corporations and businesses, or by our government; that costs us the obligation to look for injustices, to look for indignities, and to work for justice and dignity -- are we willing to pay that cost?

if we are not part of the solution, then we are part of the problem; Jesus’ talk about bringing a sword to the earth is a reminder that Christianity is, and will always be, a struggle -- a struggle to bring about God’s will on earth, which is not going to happen all by itself; are we willing, as individuals and as a church, to do the hard work in our community of making sure that God’s will is done, right here, as it is in heaven?; are we willing, as individuals and as a church, to take up the cross and truly follow Jesus?