

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday in Lent
25 February 2018

Scripture readings:

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

This morning our friend in Rome spoke about a different reading that described the Transfiguration of Jesus. I was grateful that he spoke about that because he helped me to understand why that text can occur at least three times in the cycle of the Church year. We read it on the last Sunday before Lent three weeks ago. It can also occur on or around the sixth of August which is forty days before the Triumph of the Cross, Holy Cross Day in September which is somehow reflective of Good Friday. There are people who study just the liturgical calendar and its significance.

The pope explained that the Transfiguration is remembered today because six or so days earlier Peter made his confession: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*" The pope suggested that the Transfiguration serves as a sort of dry run or prefiguration of Easter so that those closest to Jesus wouldn't be so overwhelmed by Easter when it got here, that they would have had a preview, a sort of a movie trailer, as it were, to Easter.

I don't think it's a bad thing anytime as the gathered Church of Christ to remember that we are invited always to be part of a body that is transfigured and transfiguring all the time, changing shape and appearance and adapting itself to situations in which we live and move and have our being. That became really important for us as the people of God this week when, as a part of our lively and living worship, at the kiss of peace last week John Otway brought information that the Sanctuary Church in Newfoundland was planning this coming Wednesday to have a blessing of automatic weapons, AK47s and assault rifles.

I sent out an email this week to everyone on our church mailing list with an article from the internet. As a person who lives in Newfoundland, some of the anti-LGBT information makes me feel that I have a red target on my back. I shared some of the information about that group that isn't necessarily generally available. At that time I also emailed the Roman Catholic Bishop of Scranton (the purpose of that was to inform him that this was going on in the building that was formerly St. Anthony of Padua in Newfoundland), my own Lutheran bishop in New Jersey, our bishop in Bethlehem, and the Lutheran bishop for northeastern Pennsylvania. The first person I heard back from was the Lutheran bishop in New Jersey who, through some other information stream, had wind of this already. The next person I heard from was the Roman Catholic Bishop of Scranton, Bishop Bambera, who was interested to have the connection made with St. Anthony of Padua's building and what was going on now. He gave a name of someone in his diocese who would be a person to be in touch with if our local ecumenical organization decided to do anything in response. He indicated that that would involve contact with the Roman priest in Gouldsboro. I think I made it clear that we are in touch with Father Steve Stavoy at St. Thomas More in Lake Ariel. None of the other bishops responded.

I did attempt to get the convener of the local ecumenical group to call a meeting. That didn't happen. He told me that he felt that was everybody else's thing to deal with however they wanted to and assured me that he would certainly this morning in his Methodist Church indicate that this was a misguided person who was conducting this blessing of firearms. And then more recently I received what I felt to be a rather kind communication from Ken Claflin from the Assembly of God who is not going to agree with my position. We know that. But he was willing to share some thoughts with me and I felt his contact with me was kindly, and in my first response to him I said that the school was being proactive in moving the kids out. He felt that was a good idea. He felt there was some reason to be suspicious about the motivation for the event in the first place. He made it very clear that he is against violence but he's not anti-gun.

We saw extraordinary behavior on the part of the teenagers in this country this week. When I think of what I saw, I wondered - and maybe you did, too - would I at that age have been that capable of being that clear in my thoughts, public expressed, and retain my poise and respect? I am in utter adoration of those kids. I was particularly moved by the young woman who was shot in both legs who appeared on t.v. with a black eye who received a call from the president of the United States who began his phone conversation with her, according to her report, with these words: "*I understand that you're a big fan of mine.*" And what does all of that have to say to us? And what do we as Christian people say about this?

Well, I think that there are some indications in the scripture today. The thing that hit me in the face most clearly when I read this gospel goes like this: *“Jesus began to teach his disciples that the son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed...And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him...”* Jesus said, “They have guns. They’re loaded. They have automatic weapons, and they’re going to shoot me!” Peter said, “Let’s get some and shoot them.” And Jesus says, “No.” In fact, Jesus called that idea of Peter’s demonic. Jesus says to Peter - Peter his friend, Peter the rock on which he will build his Church - he says to him, “No! That’s evil. Get behind me, Satan. This is not the way to deal with wrong-minded people.”

Jesus had an uncanny ability to speak truth and never speak anything but, even to those closest to him and those he loved most, as well as to those who opposed him. It is felt that Jesus went down from the Mount of Transfiguration and in this moment in Mark’s gospel today knew that he was going to his death in Jerusalem. So what does he do? Well, you all know Palm Sunday is coming, so we have a parade and make a big deal out of that. It’s not a military parade either. It’s not going to go down Pennsylvania Avenue, and there will be no show of weapons. There will be palm branches carried. But there is an aspect to Palm Sunday which I think is worth remembering because it’s really quite subtle. In going into Jerusalem on a jackass, Jesus was purposely, blatantly, and fully mocking the emperor. Emperors entered conquered cities through triumphal arches. So here’s Jesus on a jackass with no ammunition, no guns, imitating the behavior of the emperor - the only weapon being a palm branch. It’s interesting that the Orthodox Church, instead of palms, uses pussy willows.

Imitating this behavior of triumph in abject and absolute humility. And he knows what’s going to happen. He’s going to be seen as weak, problematic, wrong, as an enemy. And in today’s reading we only get Church people listed as an enemy: the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes - enemies of the Church who then encourage the state to believe that he’s an enemy of the state. Do you remember the question to the Church: *“Is this your king?”* *“We have no king but caesar.”*

One of the arguments being made down the street is that those firearms are to protect the Kingdom of God. As I understand it - and I don’t understand much - the liturgical dress in that place is a crown. But, my friends, the language which we speak to each other will not, can not, must not, and never shall be firearms. We have a gospel that is larger, better, and permanent.

I’ve often asked the question: What is decided in war or a shoot-out? It’s only who shoots first and best. That’s the only thing that’s decided. It doesn’t decide who is right or who is wrong. Thank God we have people trained to make sure that we can get to making decisions about who was right and who was wrong without having to kill each other or preventing this from happening. (In my thinking, this is why I don’t think teachers need to be armed unless we’re going to insist that every police person in the universe be trained as well as a high school teacher or a college professor. Their jobs are different. Just my thought.)

But Jesus’ thought is that if you are going to fight with them on their terms, you will really lose - and not just your life, but the battle. And Jesus says to Peter when he suggests this very good idea of making sure we are stronger than they are with this junk, Jesus is so quietly infuriated that he calls his close friend the devil and his ideas demonic. We sort of heard that in recent political conversation: *“When they go low, we go high.”* I think that’s essentially what Jesus was saying, that it’s not a level to which we will descend. Because God is on our side, even if it costs us our life. I heard it said somewhere this week: The question must no longer be, are you on the left or are you on the right, but are you right or are you wrong?

We get a clear sense from the gospel about Jesus - and you will hear Jesus’ name used down the street as well. You will hear the term “rod of iron.” It’s in the psalms and it’s in Revelation. You know that Revelation came into the canon of scripture not without difficulty. And you know that in scriptural periods there was nothing known as a firearm. And you will know that to cherry-pick in scripture like that, you’re in deep danger, at least with me you are. There are different ways of seeing this story, and there are different ways of reading and using scripture. And I think it’s time to grow up and be adult about that.

I also heard this week - and I don’t doubt that it’s true. It may not be exactly this way that the exchange occurred, but allegedly Mahatma Gandhi said, *“I would gladly become a Christian if you could introduce me to one.”* [laughter] Now he understood from a Hindu perspective what non-violence was. He really understood that. You may know some of the story. If you don’t, I suggest that you go see the film again. There were times when people, who

were advocating to get the British out of India, would simply walk up to soldiers and get beaten to a pulp, and then the next bunch would go and get beaten to a pulp, and then the next bunch would go and get beaten to a pulp. That had to do with the right to make salt, for God's sake.

Sticking to the guns of your truth will embarrass absolutely every last automatic weapon in the world. It may not be easy, and it's astounding to think that it sits in our neighborhood as a challenge. But the message will not go away of God's love for all people, even those holding the rifle down the barrel of which you may be looking - God's love for all people at all times and in all places. And it's when people get that wrong that they become frightened, that they think a gun can fix their problem, and that they think the enemy is in their brothers and sisters whom God loves as well. It's tough stuff, but it's the gospel.

Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him. Why? Because he said, "*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, the scribes,*"...the ecumenical clergy, the bishops who don't respond, perhaps...I don't know...a possibility..."*and be killed and after three days rise again.*" Peter said, "*Oh no, we're not going to do that. We're going to fight back. We're going to get guns and bullets and arm ourselves and have a knock-down-drag-out.*" Jesus says, "*You devil! Get behind me, Satan. My message is a message of non-violence and God's love for all people at all times, even the ones you don't like, the ones you're afraid of, the ones you don't know, the ones who scare you, and the ones who are different from you. That's the message, for you, otherwise, are setting your minds not on divine things, but on other things.*"

And we are here to practice our religion because it takes practice to change our minds, to transfigure ourselves or be transfigured by God's love, to keep our minds on divine things which are larger and better and true, and ask for God's guidance as we live through the next week of embarrassment. I am embarrassed that children in schools have to move out to accommodate the ideas of a bunch of adults right here in our midst.

We don't have all the answers, but we do have the gospel, and we practice our religion and come here regularly and faithfully to shore each other up in that. So it is as our nation wrings its hands and is in all of the contortions of grief and astonishment and all the rest of it, that we also have to deal with the realities of a constant challenge to the truth and mercy and love of God by whose name, Jesus the Christ, we call ourselves.

Now remember: Jesus was killed by his own kind, Gandhi was killed by someone from his own party, Martin Luther King Jr. was shot - not by an immigrant - but by a hateful white American. But the truth that they all spoke is our treasure, our joy, our jewel, our foundation, our faith.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.