

Saturday, August 19 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Clergy in the Diocese of Christ our Hope,

The past few weeks of violence, hatred, and racism have left us reeling. Just when we thought our world couldn't get more terrifying, it has. For years, we have sought to speak the truth in love to a world broken by sexual confusion. We have sought to live in hope under the specter of terrorism. Now, we face an eruption of racism and violence, and we feel the threat of nuclear conflict. Charlottesville has brought a spirit of anger and violence home to us. Forces of darkness are at work in our world. As those charged with the care of God's sheep, we cannot ignore this moment.

I am grateful for conversations I have had with several of you as you seek to lead and serve your congregations in these days. I am grateful that many of you have already spoken to your flocks with wisdom, love, conviction, and hope. Post-Charlottesville, I have prayed often every day, "Do I have anything to add to the conversation? Is it my responsibility to speak?" The answer to the first question is, "I doubt it." The answer to the second is, "Absolutely." We are heralds of truth, not innovators of truth. It is important for those charged with leading the Church to speak the truth and call God's people to what we already say we believe.

To that end, I want to state several truths that emerge from the Gospel and that apply to a nation in the throes of anger, racial tension, and violence.

1. It is impossible to believe the message of the Gospel, the prophetic Scriptures, and the narrative history of the New Testament church and also hold racist ideologies. It is impossible to follow Jesus in faith and justify personal and racial hatred of people.

- Read Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount concerning anger, hatred, and enemies: Matthew 5:21-48. Read the stories of how he broke down barriers between Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles: Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30; Luke 10:25-37; John 4.
- The New Testament Church faced few more radical implications of the Gospel than the breaking down of racial barriers: Acts 1:8; 2:1-21; 8:4-40; 10:1-11:18 12:1-3; 15:1-35; 17:22-34; Ephesians 2:11-23.
- The glorious prophetic picture of the Church Triumphant completely obliterates any shred of racism: Revelation 7:9-17; Isaiah 25:6-9.
- Jesus was a Jew, ministering to Jews, calling Jews into the Church, and breaking down the barrier between Jew and Gentile. Therefore, while all racism is evil, it is particularly impossible to call oneself a Christian and espouse anti-Semitic ideology.

2. The anger of man never achieves the righteousness of God. All slander, hatred, and violence are antithetical to the will and character of Christ. As Christians, we are called to lay aside all these things: Ephesians 4:25-5:2; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; James 1:19-27; 4:1-12.

3. Followers of Jesus are called to be agents and messengers of hope, mercy, life, love, and transformation through faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Our primary and fundamental mission in life is to live and proclaim the Gospel. The context for a clear witness for Jesus is a life of good works, i.e., those actions that bring blessing to people and foster a flourishing society: Titus 2:11-3:11.

4. While New Testament discussions of law and grace focus on the nature of salvation and spiritual transformation (i.e., the old covenant versus the new covenant), it is obvious from the discussion that law cannot transform hearts. We have laws in our country that should bring racial justice and control violence, but these laws do not transform people. Law as a principle does not produce a life of love: 2 Corinthians 2:12-3:18. Therefore, if we would see society changed, we must understand the priority and centrality of evangelism. In that regard, Gospel mission is personal, sacrificial, intentional, crossing every human barrier with the message of mercy in Jesus Christ. It is speaking and living the truth and love of Jesus to people we encounter, regardless of background, culture, religion, race, economics, politics, or past sins and failures: 1 Timothy 1:12-2:7.

5. God calls the Church to minister to and care for people, body, soul, and spirit. The implication and application of the Gospel has, always and everywhere, led the Church to treat people with dignity and compassion, and to seek to alleviate and correct injustice, brokenness, violence, abuse, economic need, and physical suffering. Holistic Gospel ministry is our calling, even at the risk of our own lives and security: 1 Corinthians 9:11-23; John 12: 20-32.

As a leader in the Church, it is risky to make observations about politics, especially in times of controversy and trouble. Almost everything I might think or say about events such as Charlottesville comes filtered to us through secondary sources. Every politician and political system is a mixed bag of good and evil in its economic, environmental, and social policies. Only when Jesus is Lord and his kingdom is fully present “on earth as it is in heaven” will I be able to rest my hopes in an altogether trustworthy and just political leader. Nevertheless, even with such limited expectations for earthly politicians, I still live and act within a political system. As a Christian, I am especially called to pray for our leaders. As I pray, I must shape my thoughts, prayers, and possible actions (as best I can) according to principles of Scripture.

- Romans 13:1-4: Government is established and given authority by God to control evil, avenge wrong, secure justice and order, and *promote the wellbeing of all*.
- 1 Timothy 2:1-7: We must pray for, seek, and do our best to support political leaders who produce societies of peace, not conflict, injustice, insecurity, and hatred.
- The Church, and individual Christians, are called to be a prophetic voice in society. Knowing that all political movements and politicians fall short of Jesus’ righteous rule, we must always be ready to discern and speak against evil and injustice and call our leaders to serve the common good. In doing so, we must operate within the lawful means available to us, without ourselves descending into ungodly action.

As dark and difficult as these days may be, we have the opportunity to stand more clearly than ever with the only hope that will heal and reconcile people to God and to one another (Philippians 2:12-2:16; Matthew 5:13-16). May God empower us to be agents of the Gospel in all its grace and power.

In gratitude for our life together in Christ, who is our Hope,

Bishop Steve