

June 21, 2020

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 10; 24-39

HOW TO BE AN ANGEL

Church of the Holy Comforter

Take a little stroll with me down memory lane, if you would. Set the controls of the way-back machine to a time six months ago, to late December of 2019. Remember what we were doing then? We were getting ready for Christmas. We were looking forward to our favorite Christmas traditions and favorite foods. Maybe most of all, we were counting the days until we got past all that repentant Advent music and could break out the Christmas music we love so much: “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head,” and “Sweet little Jesus boy, born long time ago.” Wasn’t that nice? Don’t you wish we were back there, with that sweet baby sleeping in his mother’s arms?

Here we are, only six months later, and in today’s Gospel reading that baby boy is all grown up and he is talking to his followers and there is nothing sweet in the slightest about what he has to say to them.

It really started with last week’s Gospel: “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of hem, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues: and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me. . . and you will be hated by all because of my name.”

Can I have what’s behind Door #2?

Then he continues. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

I miss that sweet little baby boy.

As usual, though, Jesus was right.

The headlines of the last six months have seen a lot more sword than peace. A nation riven by a presidential impeachment and a Senate trial with no witnesses and a pre-ordained outcome; a pandemic that has killed nearly 120,000 Americans, half of whom could have been saved if denial had not drowned out science; 25 million out of work; and more killings of unarmed black people, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Rayshard Brooks, by armed white police officers and civilians. Our own city has been convulsed by demonstrations protesting these offenses and protesting the monuments to those who betrayed their country to fight for the right to hold other human beings in slavery. We have even seen a Ku Klux Klansman from Hanover County drive his truck into demonstrators in Lakeside.

These conflicts within our country have been mirrored within many families. A young woman recently told me her father had called her “an idiot who throws away her money on liberal causes.” I rather unhelpfully suggested she remind him that intelligence is largely inherited.

In the middle of all this violence and death and conflict, how do we craft a faithful response as followers of Jesus?

Fortunately, he left us some reason for hope, even in this very passage.

You may have spotted on social media a list entitled “Ways to Look More Angelic.” Here are some of the suggestions in the list:

carry flowers everywhere
 pink or gold eye shadow
 soft humming
 have a pink glowy blush
 wield a flaming sword
 be covered in eyes
 three pairs of wings, and finally,
 announce your arrival by screaming “FEAR NOT” everywhere you go.

In our passage it’s not an angel who brings this message, but Jesus himself. “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”

In recent days we have seen how true this is. It was cell phone video of Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd’s neck that exposed how coldly Chauvin killed Floyd and how callously the other three Minneapolis police officers defended the killing. It was bystander

video that gave the lie to the claim by Buffalo police that 75-year-old Martin Gugino had tripped, when in fact they had shoved him violently and then walked on past as he lay bleeding from his ear on the pavement. Again and again, what is covered up gets uncovered, secrets are exposed, and lies are challenged. A big part of what Jesus sends us out to do is simply to bear witness, to speak to what we see and hear.

If you stand on the Pavilion Lawn at the University of Virginia and look down the hill, you will be looking at the facade of Old Cabell Hall, a neo-classical temple that would look at home on top of the Acropolis in Athens. In large letters across the top of the facade is inscribed in Greek: “Kai gnoestetayn aletheian, kai hay aletheia eleutherosei humas.” It is the familiar quotation from the Gospel of John, Chapter 8, Verse 32: “And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

If we are perfectly honest, however, the truth will probably make us flinch before it makes us free.

The athletics director at the University of Virginia recently had to apologize after learning that a feature of the University’s athletic logo was connected to the history of slavery on campus. The crossed sabers of the Cavaliers’ logo had a serpentine design on their handles that reflected the serpentine walls Thomas Jefferson built on campus. It turns out that the walls were built to muffle the sound of slaves and shield them from public view.

What was covered up has been uncovered, and what was secret has been made known.

So we are to have no fear of them because their misdeeds will be revealed and their secrets will be exposed, and we can be telling the truth in the light and proclaiming it from the housetops and the pedestal of the Lee statue.

Here comes the flinch: there’s one more spot secrets hide and darkness covers - in the human heart.

I generally consider myself strongly committed to racial justice and gender justice and, really, justice for all. I try to cultivate attitudes and actions that support and advance those commitments.

So I recently took the Implicit Association Test. Here’s what the website says about the test:

The IAT measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., European American and African American or Black people and White people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad). The main idea is that making a response is easier when closely related

items share the same response key. We would say that one has an implicit preference for European American (or White people) relative to African American (or Black people) if they are faster to categorize words when European American (or White people) and Good share a response relative to when African American (or Black people) and Good share a response key.

What do you suppose my test results said? They said, “Your responses suggested a strong automatic preference for European Americans over African Americans.”

So there it is, in the secret, unconscious places of my heart and mind - a strong automatic preference for people who look more like me. Lest you think I am an anomaly, the report goes on to say that of 3 million people who took this test online, 68% had an automatic preference for European Americans. Only 14% had an automatic preference for African Americans. We have much work to do in our own hearts.

At the 1996 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, Bishop Woodie White gave the following benediction:

And now, may the Lord torment you.

May the Lord keep before you the faces of the hungry, the lonely, the rejected,
and the despised.

May the Lord afflict you with pain for the hurt, the wounded, the oppressed,
the abused, the victims of violence.

May God grace you with agony, a burning thirst for justice and righteousness.

May the Lord give you courage and strength and compassion to make ours a
better community, to make your church a better church.

And may you do your best to make it so, and after you have done your best,
may the Lord grant you peace.

It is that peace, after the affliction and thirst and courage and strength and effort, after telling in the light and proclaiming from the housetops, for which we pray.

