

“We Cannot Remain Silent”

The Second Sunday after Pentecost June 3, 2018

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Bill Chadwick

Acts chapter 2: 1-6, 41-45. *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

(Then Peter got up and delivered a sermon, recounting the life and teachings of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and inviting those hearing to repent and be baptized.)

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^[i] to all, as any had need.

I am very grateful to our friend, Gwin Pratt, for his inspiration on portions of this sermon.

We continue with Pentecost. That Acts passage is so wild and woolly. I have three or four more sermons busting out of me, but I'll save them and won't give them all to you today. Amen?

The followers of Jesus are gathered together in a room. This is after the Crucifixion of Jesus. After his Resurrection and the forty days that the Resurrected Christ interacted with his disciples. And it is after his Ascension into heaven. So these followers are uncertain. Now what?

There are about 120 of them. They are all Aramaic-speaking Jews. A homogeneous group.

Suddenly, into that room, a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. And above each of their heads something that looks like flames. And most amazing of all, they start to speak in other languages, languages they did not know before. All this commotion draws a crowd, as one would expect. The Jews that have assembled there in Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost, gathered from all over the world, hear the followers of Jesus speaking in their own mother tongues—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cappadocians, Libyans, Egyptians...

Thus, **the first intentionally multicultural institution is born, the Church of Jesus.** And because of this, very soon the good news of Jesus spreads throughout the entire known world, and to non-Jews as well as Jews.

So a central theme of the Christian Pentecost is that “no single language can fully articulate the Divine.” (Pratt) **Diversity is good!**

Second. This is all happening within the Roman Empire. Like all empires, its foundation is a zero sum worldview. Zero sum means that one person’s gain is another’s loss. If you add up all the gains and subtract all the losses you get zero. In a zero sum game we draw up sides and one side wins and one side loses. A zero sum bias says there is no such thing as a win-win solution.

Slide #11 Here’s a picture of the economic system in Egypt at the time of Moses right before the Exodus, when the Israelites were slaves. At the time of Acts, 1200 years later, you can substitute the word “Rome” for “Egypt.” A few at the top, having gained their wealth on the backs of the poor. Prosperity at the top is made possible by the poverty at the bottom. “So in an Empire it is expected that in order for the privileged to maintain their quality of life, those at the margins must sacrifice their basic needs...and dignity.” (Pratt)

How does Pentecost speak to us today?

Before I go further I remind you again that I am neither a Democrat nor a Republican. I am a member of the Jesus party. From this pulpit I have spoken strongly against President Obama's immigration policy. From this pulpit I have spoken strongly against President Obama's use of military drones in the Mideast. My goal always is to speak a word that is consistent with Jesus, regardless of political party.

The current cry to “make America great again” has the tone of **re-concentrating power in the hands of the dominant racial group.** (Pratt) We see this in stringent policies against people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims. For the current political leaders, diversity is not to be embraced, but feared. And basic human rights are denied.

Second, massive tax cuts for the rich, shifting even more wealth to the few and away from the many is zero sum thinking.

But the early Church rebelled at this Empire thinking. Go back to verses 44 and 45 of Acts chapter 2: *⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

Slide #12 My friend Dan Erlander has drawn these wonderful pictures. The Jesus way, the way of sharing, *is* a big commitment. But a joyous one.

The story of Pentecost is that Jesus values—compassion, sharing, shalom—Jesus values trump Empire values.

You don't need me to tell you that our country is in a deep moral crisis today. Germany was in a deep moral crisis in the 1920s and 30s. Following World War I the victorious Allies inflicted harsh penalties of reparation on Germany, leading to the continuing chaos of mass unemployment and economic depression. Into this ripe atmosphere stepped Adolf Hitler, who preyed on people's fears in order to rise to power.

(A quick aside: Following World War II the US demonstrated that it had learned a lesson and did just the opposite of harsh reparations, instead adopting the Marshall Plan to help Germany and Japan rebuild and recover. Thus, Japan and Germany quickly became strong allies and remain so almost seventy years later. Historians contend that had the Allies following World War I chosen to be compassionate instead of vindictive we very likely never would have heard of Adolf Hitler. Justice and compassion prevent war.)

As Hitler consolidated power and implemented his fascist policies, including the persecution and extermination of Jews and people with disabilities, gays and gypsies, most of the self-declared “German Christians” went along with him. Astonishingly, they saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Nazism. “The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God’s will for the German people.” (Introduction to *The Theological Declaration of Barmen* in *The Book of Confessions*, p. 246.)

But some in the churches were faithful. They resisted, including Martin Niemoller and Karl Barth. Eventually, 139 church leaders gathered in the town of Barmen in May of 1934. There they formulated a courageous call to the Christian Church in Germany to recognize that Hitler was not their ultimate fuehrer (the German word for “leader”) but that the only one deserving of ultimate allegiance is Jesus. It is called the Barmen Declaration and is one of the Presbyterian Church’s ten official confessions of faith.

Many of us have recognized that today in the United States we are in a Barmen time. Our political leadership is largely morally bankrupt.

And what of our Church leadership? We look back at the “German Christians” in utter dismay and befuddlement. “How could they have gone along with Hitler?” we ask ourselves.

Today. 2018. Most people in the self-identified “evangelical” wing of the American Church have turned a blind eye to lying, turned a blind eye to the mistreatment of refugees, the mistreatment of people of color, the mistreatment of women, the mistreatment of God’s Creation.

Evangelicals have sold their soul to the Devil. They have turned their backs on Jesus. They are guilty of idolatry and have brought shame on

the church. Non-Christians in our country look in horror at what the evangelicals are doing or not doing and they, the non-Christians, understandably look with disdain at the church and the name of Jesus.

It gives me no joy in calling out our sisters and brothers. But the Truth must be spoken. I can do no other.

On Ash Wednesday of this year some of the biggest names in the American Church gathered to formulate a response to the deep moral crisis our nation faces. These names include theologian Walter Bruggemann, Sojourners founder Jim Wallis, Cynthia Hale, Sharon Watkins, Tony Campolo, Richard Rohr, John Perkins, William Willimon...They may not be known to many of you, but they are the All-Stars of the Christian Church in America. They are the LeBron Jameses and Maya Moores of the Church. They have issued a statement entitled, **“Reclaiming Jesus.”** It is in the same structure as the Barmen Declaration.

It is, in my opinion, absolutely inspired by the Holy Spirit and it is inspiring.

VIDEO

To recap: slides

I. WE BELIEVE each human being is made in God’s image and likeness. Amen?

II. WE BELIEVE we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, identity, or class. Amen?

III. WE BELIEVE how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself.

IV. WE BELIEVE that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Amen?

V. WE BELIEVE that Christ’s way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. Amen?

VI. WE BELIEVE Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples. Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. Amen?

So what? What's next? That's the question each of you needs to ask of every sermon. Okay, preacher, what do you want me to do?

Two things. On the way out of worship today the ushers will hand out printed copies of the brief version of this declaration. I invite all of you who wish to grab a cup of coffee or glass of water and meet in Gideon Pond Hall for some conversation around this topic and possible next steps for our congregation. That will start about five minutes or so after worship is over. I expect we might meet for half an hour, no more than an hour. Leave when you wish.

Second, I encourage you to join the Move to Amend efforts. This is a movement to amend the US constitution to remove money from politics, to overturn the Supreme Court decision Citizens United, but much more--to codify the idea that money is not speech and corporations are not persons. Amen?

How many of you care about the environment? Show of hands. How many of you care about the treatment of the powerless, which covers many categories of people? Show of hands. The SINGLE most important political action you can take then is to reform campaign financing. We no longer have any semblance of democracy in this country because big money has bought our government.

And if you are thinking, "Hey, Bill, you're talkin' politics. We're in church." I say to you that this has *everything* to do with Jesus...Jesus who cares deeply about the environment, Jesus who cares deeply about the treatment of the powerless, Jesus who died as a political criminal.

This country is in crisis and those of us who claim to follow Jesus cannot remain silent. Amen?

Because we love our country...because we love our country...here today we reclaim the name of Jesus.

Amen?

RECLAIMING JESUS

Notes from the post-worship meeting on Sunday, June 3, to brainstorm ideas around the “Reclaiming Jesus” statement. (See reclaimingjesus.org) About 90 people participated in the conversation and generated the following action ideas:

Individual actions:

- Pray for change, for our politicians, for protection for our congregation
- Work for Move to Amend to reform campaign financing
- Vote (See Project Vote Smart to see how candidates have voted)
- Help with voter registration
- Listen to both sides of political broadcasting
- Engage in political process, volunteer for candidates.
- Call our elected representatives
- Share ideas on social media respectfully. Use THINK test: Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it Inspiring? Is it Necessary? Is it Kind?
- Write letters to the editor
- Move to a troubled neighborhood
- Rent a room to a poor person/allow people to stay at our home for a time
- Build relationships within Oak Grove
- Personal rest is important to develop and maintain personal resilience
- Strategically boycott, invest, disinvest

- Engage with others of different views: www.better-angels.org
- Read *Tears We Cannot Stop* by Michael Eric Dyson (The session is doing so this summer. The congregation is invited to join in.)
- Visit immigration detention centers
- Improve kindness in this world

Organizations to join:

The ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) to engage through their network.

www.jewishcommunityaction.org/our-work/housing-justice

www.poorpeoplescampaign.org

As a congregation:

- Make our own Oak Grove “Reclaiming Jesus” video
- Work to get the “Reclaiming Jesus” statement adopted at General Assembly
- “Burma Shave” type signs to spell out our values
- Buy a house and rent to the poor
- Reparations for slavery and treatment of Native Americans
- Engage Oak Grove youth for their thoughts/actions