



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Walking by Faith
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 11, 2019
The Rt. Rev. Phoebe Roaf

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The message Isaiah is instructed to deliver to God's people is sobering.

"Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood."

Isaiah must have been reluctant to inform the people of Judah and Jerusalem, God's chosen people, that God was no longer interested in receiving their prayers.

How would the people respond?

It's like your bishop showing up this morning and saying, brothers and sisters, the Lord doesn't want anything to do with you. All of this, the beautiful sanctuary and vestments and music, it doesn't mean anything because your hands and your hearts aren't clean.

Thanks be to God, that's NOT the charge I received from the Lord.

And yet, I think the prophet's words are worth considering for those of us who are good church folk.

We show up on Sundays and volunteer for various church ministries.

We make financial commitments to the church.

We're upstanding, law abiding members of society.

Yet the experience of the people of Judah and Jerusalem demonstrates that God expects much more from us than that.

God considers all aspects of our lives; nothing about who we are is hidden from God's gaze.

What God seeks, in a word, is justice.

The text clearly spells that out.

"Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

As I read this list, brothers and sisters, a life of faithful discipleship involves the decisions we make Sunday evening through Saturday night as well as our actions on Sunday mornings.

Faithfulness is no small matter. It doesn't just happen – it requires intentionality on our part.

For those of you being confirmed or received or reaffirmed this morning, this is a significant step in your journey with the Lord. Your Calvary family will have expectations for you, and so will God.

Before we become discouraged, consider Jesus's words to the disciples in our Gospel lesson: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your father's pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Jesus presents the kingdom of God as a gift that God is pleased to give us. It's God's deep desire that we dwell in God's kingdom, where we will be nourished and sustained in a way that we can't experience from any other source. I tend to think God is pleased with me when I'm obedient but that I have to earn God's approval when I've fallen short of God's expectations.

Jesus' instruction to sell your possessions and give alms to the poor can lead to the conclusion that I have to earn God's love. But the fact of the matter, brothers and sisters, is that God's love has nothing to do with our worthiness.

Our seat at the table is a reflection of the grace and mercy and compassion of God. It's already been provided so there's nothing we have to earn, What God asks of us in return is that we demonstrate generosity to our neighbors. And we know how God defines a neighbor – every single person we encounter. Period. If all human beings are created in God's image, then all human beings are our neighbors deserving compassion and generosity.

God invites us to be generous for two reasons. First, it is a means by which we acknowledge all that God has done for us. It is one of the ways we say thank you Lord, for being so good to me, for blessing me with the gift of life, for making a way when there was no way. Second, generosity creates room in our hearts to receive what God has to give to us. Because when we're holding on tightly to our ego and our need to be right and our anger and our possessions and our racial pride, we aren't in a posture to accept God's good gifts.

Whatever takes up our time and energy is where our heart is focused. What is preoccupying your time and your thoughts these days? There are so many challenges facing our city and our nation that it's easy to stay up at night worried about where we are headed. It can seem overwhelming. And if we decide to be part of the solution, how can we possibly know where to begin? Our fears can paralyze us, preventing us from taking action.

One way to counter this paralysis is to pick one project to work on. I may not be able to solve everything, but I can do something. I don't have to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the issues confronting me.

Calvary, you have already engaged in some of this difficult and life giving work. In this urban context, you serve folk from all backgrounds and walks of life through your extensive ministries. And you are playing a role in healing the racial divisions within our community.

I want to commend you for the thoughtful and prayerful process you engaged in as you revised the marker about the life and legacy of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former Confederate general, Ku Klux Klan leader, dealer in enslaved persons, and beloved child of God.

Those conversations were difficult and yet what an important witness you made through your honesty. If there were a hole in the wall, I could see the place where enslaved Africans were bought and sold. Some of the people who participated in that market Monday through Saturday came through these doors to worship on Sunday.

That's a part of our legacy as Episcopalians that has been difficult to acknowledge. Because we're uncomfortable discussing these topics, we haven't shared our respective stories in a way which can lead to healing. The history books have silenced many voices. Brothers and sisters these voices are crying out, demanding to be heard.

I support of your racial reconciliation and social justice initiatives, and I invite you to be part of our diocesan conversation about this important work. Our diocese is called to identify the oppressed and orphans and widows in our community and reach out to them in love and compassion. To move beyond the walls of our beautiful buildings and meet people where they are. Our faith communities thrive when they are places where people from all walks of life are invited to have an encounter with the risen Christ.

I don't have all of the answers, but I know that things are not right in our country.

The level of gun violence is unacceptable. The treatment of our immigrant brothers and sisters is not Christian. God is not interested in our prayers when human beings are mistreated in our community and we remain silent. We are called to be courageous, because the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves is not politically correct.

Yet there is good news in today's lessons.

Isaiah reminds us that God will transform our scarlet sins into snow.

If we are willing and obedient, the prophet says, we will eat the good of the land.

We don't have to be perfect. God knows all too well that perfection is not achievable this side of the grave.

But we can cultivate a heart willing to do God's will and obedient to God's commandments.

That's something all of us can do.

That's why being part of a community of faith is so important.

We need one another for support and encouragement in those moments when we falter.

We aren't called to embark upon this journey by ourselves.

All of us, like our ancestor Abraham, are walking by faith and not by sight.

It's difficult work and it's life giving work.

May God give us the insight to recognize how we can to make a difference in this world, and the confidence to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to a world which desperately needs to hear it.

Amen.