

“Living ‘Woke’: When Thoughts and Prayers Aren’t Enough”

Sermon: Year A, Pentecost 23, Proper 27, Lectionary 32

Texts: Amos 5:18–24, Matthew 25:1–13

Preached: November 12, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who calls for flowing justice, and from Christ Jesus, the Bridegroom who wakes us from slumber. AMEN

Just last Sunday, Charly, Grace, Maren, and I, as part of the work of the Active Welcome Task Force, took a tour outside the building, looking at how our signage does and does not welcome people. As we walked around, we noted the small, faded emblems posted on the doors, bearing the image of a firearm with a red slash across, announcing to passersby that weapons are not welcome here. Our little signs are quite faded, and tired-looking. We debated the message that they give. They’re intended as small reminders that this is a place where we seek to speak peace, a mark of the hope of safety from violence. But their appearance might speak a different message, a message of weariness with the whole issue.

Little did we know that only an hour before, a gunman had burst into the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, a congregation about the size of our own, mowing down women and men, children and the aged, massacring 25 people and an unborn child as the congregation worshiped and prayed. I heard the news as I drove home to Elgin, and was heartsick that yet again, only weeks after the last mass shooting, innocent people had suffered at the hands of violent persons armed with military-style weapons whose only purpose is mass destruction...and this time, in a church. Reporters were already referring to it as “the worst mass shooting in a house of worship *to date*.” Think about that! Mass shootings have become so common that we’ve begun to categorize them by where they occur—and we are now assuming that they will continue to occur. We’ve become weary, and in our weariness, we are becoming resigned to acceptance of these once-horrifying events as simply the way things are.

And almost immediately the now-familiar chorus began: “Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Sutherland Springs.” Politician after politician mouthed the same words: “Thoughts and prayers.” “Thoughts and prayers.” The words have become cliché, because they’re the same words that are uttered after every single one of these awful massacres. Just plug in the name of the city. “Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Las Vegas...the people of Orlando...the people of Sandy Hook...the people of Killeen...the people of San Bernardino...the people of Fort Hood...the people of Charleston...the people of Blacksburg...” “Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers.” And then absolutely nothing is done to change the situation.

Kirsten Powers, writing in the *Washington Post*, says, “Politicians have managed to make a once benign, if not comforting, phrase sound almost profane.” She goes on to explain, “It’s not that there is anything wrong with praying for those who are suffering. In fact, if you are a religious believer, it’s an imperative. I’m not in the camp that dismisses prayer as superstitious mumbo-jumbo embraced only by the unenlightened. I’m a person who prays and who has been prayed for and knows its power. But it’s not enough. Nor is it what we hire politicians to do. We elect them to fix problems, enact policies, and keep us safe. Instead, we have elected officials—many of them self-described conservative Christians who also happen to take money from the National Rifle Association—using cries for ‘thoughts and prayers’ as some sort of inoculation against responsibility or action when it comes to gun violence.”

Sisters and brothers, prayer is not enough. And when “thoughts and prayers” are used as a dodge to avoid acting to save lives and protect innocent people from suffering, those thoughts and prayers become an offense to the very God to whom they ostensibly are addressed. Theologian Miroslav Volf, speaking to Kirsten Powers, had this to say: “There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to resolve. It is analogous to what is going on in the book of James 2:16: If a person says to those who are cold and hungry, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? Or if you look at the story of the good Samaritan, we can easily imagine that the priest, who walked by a person robbed and left half-dead by the road, prayed as he was passing by. Still, he was a bad priest. The Samaritan was good because he did something to help the suffering person.”

We cannot, when we see injustice or suffering, simply “pray it away,” and think that we have discharged our responsibility to the world. Our God demands that we live justly. That thundering passage from the Prophet Amos that we heard a few moments ago makes that abundantly clear. Those words were addressed to good religious folk who imagined that they were pleasing God by coming together for worship, and by making

offerings, and by praying and singing publicly in stirring assemblies. But they lived in a society that was oppressing the poor, and the widow and the orphan, and the stranger living in the land. The powerful had implemented laws that laid heavy burdens of taxation on the weak, they had appropriated the land that the Torah had taught them was to be distributed so that everyone had a portion, they oppressed their workers, the powerless were not being given justice in the courts. And God rejected their prayers, because what God demands is mighty streams of justice, not torrents of meaningless words that allow injustice to flourish.

We cannot simply offer our “thoughts and prayers.” But even those of us who are not politicians do the same, don’t we? Most often, it’s because we don’t know what else to do. We are numbed by the enormity of the suffering. My niece by marriage, Rebecca, a social worker, wrote this: “There’s a term in psychology called ‘psychic numbing’ in which, as the number of victims in a tragedy increases, our empathy, our willingness to help, reliably decreases. This happens even when the number of victims increases from one to two. This is why charitable organizations often present the story of one starving child and have you ‘adopt’ that child with your donations. We’re more likely to donate and help when we can connect. It’s one of the less attractive elements of human nature. But maybe this is why shooting after shooting nothing is done. Nothing. 20 children? Nothing. 12 moviegoers? Nothing. 9 church goers? Nothing. 49 people at a club? Nothing. 58 people at a concert? Nothing. So let’s try something new. I encourage you to read about the life of each individual victim of the Sutherland Springs attack. I will even get you started: Ryland Ward was found lying among church pews in agonizing pain by his aunt, Leslie Ward. The five-year-old was left fighting for his life after being shot four times when a gunman opened fire in a church. Suffering four gunshot wounds to his stomach, groin and arm. His uncle who carried him out of the church said, ‘They got him all cut open, from the gunshots,’ adding: ‘I don’t think he’s going to make it.’ This has to stop. Something has to change. We cannot stand for complacency.”

Numbness. Complacency. Weariness. Helplessness. We are all experiencing it. And it’s not just the gun issue and mass shootings. Injustice upon injustice piles up around us. It’s as though, like the ten bridesmaids in today’s parable, we’ve all drifted off to sleep waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom who will usher in the feast of peace and justice. But it’s time to wake from our slumber, to shake off the depressed torpor of the overwhelmed and to begin not only to pray for justice and peace, but to *work* for justice and peace. In the African-American community, there’s a word that has begun to take on new power, and that is now passing into common use in other communities as well, and that word is “woke.” “Woke” is used to describe someone who has become more aware of the racial and social injustices that surround us, and who is not only aware, but who is spurred to action by that awareness. And “woke” describes aptly, I think, the way that you and I are called to live as followers of Jesus. We are called to open our eyes to see the injustice around us, to see the disparities of income and opportunity, to see the abuses of power, to see the ways in which sex is used to oppress, to see the connections between wealth and power and our idolatry of guns, to see the suffering of the homeless and the hungry... I’ll stop the list there, lest in recounting all of the injustices I cause us all to retreat into sleep. We need not only to be “woke,” we need to “stay woke.”

And that’s the dilemma for us. In waiting for the banquet of peace, we get overwhelmed. We naturally retreat into slumber because it’s all just too painful to contemplate, it’s taking so long, and we seem so small. But sisters and brothers, you and I are not alone in this. We are children of the Most High God, empowered and sent to proclaim Good News to a world desperate to hear Good News, and gifted and called in our baptism to “work for justice and peace in all the world.” But it seems as though our oil is running out. We need a new supply. Ironically, prayer is one of the ways in which we can be resupplied. But our prayer needs to be not simply for God to take care of the problem. Our prayer needs to be that God will make us part of the solution, and will give us the boldness and the power and the will to stand up and act for justice, no matter how small and insignificant we may feel our actions to be. One of my seminary professors once said, “You should pray no prayer for which you are not simultaneously asking God to make you part of the answer to your prayer.”

If we are to experience those streams of justice, we must “stay woke.” We must live justly, we must act justly, we must demand justice from those with power to establish justice. Every action we take, be it a phone call or email or post card to a political leader, every contribution we make from our resources to organizations advocating for justice or providing care and support to victims of injustice, every time we speak up against the powers of evil and destruction and oppression, every time we act for justice, we are opening ourselves up to being part of the answer to the prayers we raise. So pray to be equipped with the oil you need, the oil of the Spirit’s own power, and wake from slumber. The kingdom of justice is at hand. Stay woke! AMEN