

22 Pentecost 2020

Lord, we know that you are faithful over all things, even the hard, dark times of our lives. Help us not back away from you in our times of grief. Help us instead to lean into you and trust you, even when we do not understand your ways. Please keep our heads above the waters of anguish and our feet from slipping off the ground of truth. Help us see you in these hard moments and glorify you in our response. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

More than ever, politics seems driven by conflict and anger. People sitting together in pews every Sunday have started to feel like strangers, loved ones at the dinner table like enemies. Toxic political dialogue, hate-filled rants on social media, and agenda-driven news stories have become the new norm.

Especially in church, political discussions for the most part have been off-limits at coffee hour; in bygone days when there was a coffee hour anyway.

No matter how you view the election, what must be acknowledged is that over 230,000 Americans have died in the last 8 months. The sheer numbers have numbed the feelings of rage and shock for many. For others, the anger has been focused against those who are trying to protect life at the expense of the economy.

In the midst of all of this is the election, just 48 hours away. Many of us have already voted so all we can do is to wait. Yet still the discussions among friends and relatives are muted.

When I worked the primary election at the Fairgrounds in August, there was one Poll challenger who was walking around watching. I was not even sure which political party he represented.

I will be working the election at Adrian Township this time and I guess I was surprised that they are expecting Precinct challengers, Poll watchers, news reporters, Police, and

protestors. I can only imagine what will be happening at the Fairgrounds, let alone in Jackson, Ann Arbor, and Lansing. All of this is happening due to possible voter intimidation which almost seems unreal in a place like Adrian.

Examples of voter intimidation include:

Confronting voters, especially doing so in military-style uniforms;

Brandishing firearms to intimidate voters from approaching a polling station or casting a vote; or verbally threatening violence.

Poll watchers who monitor the actual voting process have strict guidelines on what they can do and say:

They are prohibited from campaigning inside a precinct, and they cannot interfere with the voting process beyond reporting an issue to the Precinct Chair.

I was asked to be a part of a group called; "Lawyers and Collars".

Clergy were being sought out to provide a calming ministry of presence at polling places, especially in the nine battleground states: Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. It makes sense to me why this was being done and it is definitely ministry. But I wanted to be part of the election process locally and did not to be asked to go to Detroit, Ann Arbor, Jackson or Lansing to be present at their polling places due to a greater risk of violence.

Who knows, maybe I was being too optimistic that Adrian would not be a hot spot for voter intimidation.

Even the Red Cross is on alert, in case they need to respond to areas of rioting or violence associated with Election day itself or over the days following.

Add to that another hurricane striking the Gulf Coast this past week.

An article from USA today said the following:

“AURORA, Colo. — Tabitha Converse is quietly preparing for Election Day and the weeks beyond by stocking her basement pantry with canned goods, toilet paper and other basic supplies. She even persuaded her husband to buy a hunting rifle, just in case.

Like millions of Americans, Converse, 43, fears the potential for violence that experts say may accompany this year's presidential election. A mother of two who works as a dental hygienist, Converse is trying not to worry too much, but with a pandemic, civil rights protests and raging wildfires piled atop the election's boiling-hot rhetoric, well, who knows what might happen?

Most experts predict scattered violence is the worst the United States could experience this Election Day, given isolated incidents that have already taken place this year. But across the country, Americans like Converse are stocking up and preparing to hunker down to ride out a possible wave of sustained election-related chaos. They are buying guns and ammunition in record numbers and getting ready to peel off political bumper stickers and yank out yard signs to make themselves less of a target in case the other guy wins. Some are fleeing for remote areas or custom-built bunkers.

"It just seemed, well, stupid isn't the right word, but it doesn't make sense to be that ill-prepared," says Converse, a lifelong Republican who voted Democrat in the presidential

race for the first time this year. "A civil war? That could last for years. We don't have years' worth of supplies and if it went on for years, well, you could always go out and shoot a deer."

Wow! If this was a Netflix movie, the only thing missing is a Zombie attack, **but hold on, the week is just beginning.**

I started thinking about how we, as Christians, respond to aggression and injustice issues today. I never considered whether or not we should respond, we must respond. The Rev Richard Rohr said; "Christianity is a lifestyle — a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared and loving. However, we made it into an established "religion" (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change itself. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish and vain in most of Christian history, and still believe that Jesus is one's "personal Lord and Savior" ... The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great. (—Richard Rohr, shared by Rev. Dennis L. Stone, Terrace Lake United Methodist Church, Kansas City, Missouri.)

Aggression and injustice certainly exist all around us today, so how do we, as Christians, respond in the light of the Beatitudes as given to us by Jesus?

We have heard this reading from Matthew many, many, times over the years. I can tell you that there is an entire sermon that could be given on each beatitude.

Interestingly, back in February, only a few weeks before we were locked down, we had this same gospel reading. For myself, it just didn't have the same impact then as it does now, two days before one of the most significant elections in our nation's history. Nine months after more than 230,000 Americans have died from COVID 19, multiple protests that have

occurred throughout the country as a result of the violent deaths to Black Americans, and hurricanes and burning fires that have affected folks from coast to coast.

There is so much to unpack with each beatitude and we simply cannot tackle this today. I would however ask that you take the time to pray about, meditate on, and to study each one, to discover its relevance for you in your life. If you ever needed a reason to do this, 2020 has give you ample cause.

If you want to set up the circumstances for the Sermon on the Mount, it helps to go back to the end of Chapter 4. The Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, Lutheran Minister and public theologian writes this:

“See, here’s why sometimes it’s good to ignore the chapter and verse separations. Because it’s so easy for us to default to hearing Jesus’ sermon on the mount as pure exhortation. As though he is giving us a list of things we should try and be so we can be blessed — be meeker, be poorer and mournier a little more and you will meet the conditions of earning Jesus’ blessing. But the thing is, it’s hard to imagine Jesus exhorting a crowd of demoniacs and epileptics to be meeker. He wasn’t telling them what to try and become. He was telling them you are blessed and you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This was his special class of people to whom he preached.

I mean, perhaps there were people in the crowd who totally had their crap together. People who had solid relationships and had paid off their student loans and always backed up their hard drives. People who had nothing they felt shame about and who didn’t have terrible secrets and knew exactly what they were doing. Of course, that is possible those people were in the crowd, it’s just, that’s not who we are told were coming to Jesus.

The ones we are told were coming to Jesus, the ones presumably to whom he was preaching, were described as the sick, those who were in pain, who fought with demons, who were broken and addicted and late on their back taxes. Who has more than one ex-wife, and who watch too much Netflix and think that maybe a little heroin might be a good idea. In other words, they were people standing in the need of God. And standing in the need of God is standing in the way of blessedness in a way that having it all together never is.”

—Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Sermon on that special class of salty, light-bearing people to whom Jesus preaches,” Patheos.com, February 13, 2014. patheos.com. Retrieved July 22, 2019.

Those who are blessed are on the right track and doing what is right. Therefore, they find favor with God. This requires a knowledge of and actively seeking out God.

I like the interpretation of the Beatitudes as found in “The Message”. It helps to explain them for me.

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

4 “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

5 “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

6 “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

7 “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

8 “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

9 “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

10 “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

11-12 “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

In this time of fear, aggression, intimidation, hopelessness, sickness and death, the words of Jesus addressed to each of us, show us a way through these trials. They show us a way to confront the evils in society; they show us a way to not only survive, but to be Blessed and find favor with God.

Then and only then, can we show others the Way.

AMEN!