

7 Easter 2021

“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one”.

There was a play that came out in 1980 followed by a movie in 1984. It was called “Mass Appeal”. I never saw the play, but the movie was one that I have always remembered.

Looking back, it was actually not so much about what I remembered. In my mind, it was about a seminarian who was gay and his eventual barring to ordination by a very conservative Monsignor. The description of the play is as follows:

“Father Tim Farley is highly popular with his parishioners due to his charm, wit, easy-going manner, and entertaining (but unchallenging) sermons. One Sunday, seminarian Mark Dolson interrupts Farley's sermon to challenge his stance on the ordination of women. The pastor is outraged, yet intrigued, by the young man and asks to have him assigned to work with him.

Dolson is a firebrand eager to change the Church. He enjoys attacking Farley's "song and dance theology" and questioning why he drinks so much. Dolson feels it is his job to shake parishioners out of their complacency. Farley likes Dolson but sees that he will never succeed as a priest if all he does is irritate people and make enemies. Each man has something to teach the other about how to perform his priestly duties”. There are several moments in the film that stood out for me, but one takes place after Mark is kicked out of seminary by the Monsignor, and Father Farley is determined to get the congregation to write letters of protest to the Diocese on behalf of Mark.

However, his well-intentioned plea for help, to the conservative congregation, does not go as planned.

“We know that there are all forms of persecution in this world. We watch the 7:00 news for one week, we’d be sure to see most of them. But what about the ones that occur right here in this town? Here in this parish, one’s we could do something about. Now let’s just think of a time when we thought someone was being persecuted for their race or their religion, or their past. And let’s just think about how we responded”. (it is at this point that people start coughing) He continues; “I realize in some cases that there is only so much you can do, but...did we do less? Now let’s just think (more coughing and fidgeting from the congregation) I don’t want you to be too hard on yourselves, and I am not trying to impose a sense of guilt on all of us. We’re trying to get away from that sort of thing in the church you know. Nevertheless, still, we should be aware of, we should take the time to; for example, let’s take Mark Dolson. Now Mark is being persecuted and he needs our help. Well perhaps, persecuted is too strong a uh...he is experiencing difficulty at St. Francis Seminary with Monsignor, with the higher ups, because (a lot more coughing now) he’s young...that’s natural, age has a natural resentment of youth. It just seems to happen. Sooo, some of us might say that uh, that Mark can take care of himself. Well, that’s true, others might say that Mark asks for trouble. That is true also. So, you might say that Mark doesn’t need our help. Then who does...need our help? Many of you may not know this but when I was young, my father beat me regularly. I mean he sent me literally flying across rooms. **That is persecution. And that is something we should all watch out for.** So, if any on us know of a child who is being abused, don’t be afraid to act. You call the County Task Force at 555-3095”.

That was the end of his plea. You see, over the years, Father Farley had become very well aware of the signs of discontent from the congregation if his sermons became too controversial or challenging. So, he avoided controversy. He needed their love and acceptance.

Before Mark left, his message to Farley was: “What you believe has got to be more important than what your congregation thinks of you”.

If you get the chance to watch the movie, it definitely has its good points.

For most of my almost 25 years of priesthood, I have not had to worry about being fired because I was too controversial. When you do supply work, worst case scenario is that they do not ask you back. If I toned down a sermon, it was because I too did not want to offend anyone.

Many issues that we face as Episcopalians **are important** and they demand a response such as recent events in the fighting between Israel and Palestine and the increasing loss of life. Also, of the violence in Columbia which prompted the following remarks from the Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, this past Friday: “We pray and ask that all people of goodwill join hands and work together for the realization of peace, the establishment of justice and the way of reconciliation of love and life for all the people of Colombia. We stand with you in your struggle and pray God’s blessing and guidance on you and on the entire human family. Amen”.

The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry

Presiding Bishop and Primate

The Episcopal Church

Certainly, speaking out against injustice and violence in the world is important for each of us to do as Christians. However, the message seems less controversial when it involves those in other countries.

The message from the pulpit becomes more controversial when it applies to systemic racism and white privilege in this country. The unjust treatment of those seeking asylum at our southern borders. Poverty and food insecurity in our cities. Stricter laws that inhibit the rights of those who can vote in elections. Social justice issues involving the LGBTQ communities. Unequal treatment of people of color within our justice system.

One would think that these are issues that, for us as Episcopalians, should not be controversial, but we know this is not the case. There are folks within the church at either end of any issue within society. But avoiding them from the pulpit, to avoid the congregations coughing and fidgeting, can become all too easy.

I have tried to do better over the past several months because it is the right thing to do. But I am also very aware, that in this part of Michigan, speaking out on some of these issues will meet with opposition even by other Christians.

It also does not mean that my opinions are always the right one.

Jesus spoke out against injustice and preached the love of God and neighbor even though it led to his death on the cross. He wasn't too worried about being loved and accepted by those he met. In his prayer to God, Jesus says;

"I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. 15 My prayer is not that you take them out of

the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it”.

We walk in the world while remaining apart from it. It is a narrow path that we travel. At times it is made more perilous by those near to us. I have heard it said more than once that the Episcopal church is declining in numbers because it is too liberal. That may be true. To be a part of the Jesus Movement today means taking positions that are not popular with the world, and with some other Christians. We are to love God above all else and to love our neighbors as ourselves. This means everyone, not a select few. It means looking for God in every single person because God is already there.

Jesus knows that this is not always easy, especially when he is not physically present to guide us or when evil threatens to throw us off course. The challenge is always to remember who we are and whose we are: citizens of another world, a breed apart.

It is a message we must proclaim within our congregations, our local communities, and all those we come in contact with.

God’s love for each of us is not proclaimed only from the pulpit but by **every** member of a congregation. It is not our proclamation that gives validity to the message of Christ’s love, but instead, gives validity to the members of the congregation. Any congregation that does not proclaim the love of Christ by word and example is going to slowly perish. After all, this is what we promise every time we renew our Baptismal Covenant.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all

people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People I will, with God's help.

The fact that Jesus loves each of us, just for who we are, is a **joyful** message that begs to be shared. As Jesus reminds us this morning; we are sent into the world, sheep among the wolves, but we are never alone. You can't ask for more than that!

Amen