

B Lectionary 31 11.4.18

Mark 12:28-34

Focus Statement: We are not stuck in silence.

We are celebrating All Saints Day today, because we always celebrate it on the first Sunday in November. But the somber beginning to the service, with the reading of names of our dearly departed, and carrying forward candles, seems even more appropriate this day, at the close of a week when our nation laid thirteen people to rest among the saints triumphant, eleven people shot in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, and two in a grocery store in Louisville. Thirteen people, victims of racism and anti-Semitism, and we're lucky that number isn't higher. The Louisville shooter first tried to enter an African American church where earlier that day seventy people had been at worship. And we're just a week out from fourteen pipe bombs being sent through the mail to targets across the nation, pipe bombs that could have gone off at any number of crowded places killing any number of innocent people. Thirteen funerals this week, for thirteen people killed by blind hate. I didn't know them, but the weight of their loss, the weight of our nation's collective grief at hatred spun out of control, sits heavy on my heart. At an interfaith service last Sunday, the rabbi of Tree of Life Synagogue, Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, shared how as he lays awake at night, he reflects on Psalm twenty-three, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." "Well God, I want," said Rabbi Myers, "What I want, you can't give me. You can't return these eleven beautiful souls."

One thing I admire about our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith, a thing I think we as Christians lost somewhere along the way and could learn from them, is the understanding that it's ok to argue with God, it's ok to be angry with God. God is big; God can take it. The

psalms, our collective first prayer book, is rich with examples of such turmoil. Rabbi Myers described wrestling with Psalm twenty-three. The Psalm immediately preceding it, Psalm twenty-two, is the Psalmist wrestling with God. It begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and then dances back and forth between praise and anguish, between hope and despair. The psalms teach us that faith and anger are not contradictory feelings, but in fact it takes deep faith to hold righteous anger, to understand the truth in it. If God is a capricious God, uncaring or unattached, then there would be no point to anger. It is precisely because we know God to be "a merciful God, slow anger and abounding in steadfast love," that fuels the psalmist's anger and demand for God to show up and be God, to show up and do what a righteous God should do. Even when, as Rabbi Myers remarked, that thing we want is a thing we cannot have.

And if faith and anger are not contradictory feelings, neither are anger and love. Hate and love are contradictory, as are hate and faith, but anger and love are not. Like faith, love can be what fuels anger, and love is also what tempers it, what keeps it in tension and moving in ways that are helpful and healing. Friends, I think God is angry at the state of our world right now, at the violence, the division, the degradation of our planet and of each other, God's good creation. God's anger is fueled not by vengeance, but by God's own deep love for us and for this world which God called good. At least, I hope God is angry, because if God is not, I don't know where to stand.

And in the same way I take comfort in the back and forth of the psalms, and the example in them of the back and forth of faith and anger, of anger and love, I take comfort in the

example Jesus set in our Gospel reading for this morning. Because as tumultuous, violent, and uncertain as the world feels today, it has nothing on the uncertainty and instability of Jesus' time. Our Gospel for this morning was from Mark chapter twelve, which is right in the middle of Holy Week. Fun fact for you, Mark is a Gospel known for its urgency and the use of the word "immediately." But after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem in Mark chapter eleven, the pace of the narrative slows way down, and the last days of Jesus' life take up as much as the entire Galilean ministry. Everything from here until his death in chapter fifteen is Jesus ratcheting up the tension until it finally breaks open on the cross, death no longer able to hold back the promise Christ contained.

As part of that ratcheting up of tension, since the coming into Jerusalem Jesus had been engaged in arguments, with the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, about anything and everything, as they tried to trap him. But the scribe who approached him in this morning's reading was different. "Seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?'" This question, unlike all the others lobbied at Jesus before, was an honest one. This was the sort of question which two religious scholars would debate back and forth between each other, not to change the other's mind but to learn from each other, to have their own minds challenged and grown. Another gift we need to relearn from our Jewish sisters and brothers is the tradition of religious debate not to change the other's mind, but to challenge our own. Entering into the sort of honest conversation that the scribe engaged Jesus is risky, because it involves true openness. So often we engage those with whom we disagree, if we engage them at all, in the same way the other religious leaders engaged Jesus, with the "correct" answer already

firmly in our minds, confident that we know the one right answer, and that nothing the other person says could do anything to change what we know to be true.

The answer Jesus gave was both disarmingly simply and endlessly complex. “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’” This is what is known in Judaism as the Shema, from the Hebrew word for “hear,” and as we heard in our first reading from Deuteronomy, this is a verse that the scribe would have known well, one which he would have had mounted on the lintels of his door, which is still hung on the doors of Jewish homes today. The shooter in Pittsburgh inevitably walked under it to enter the sanctuary, this bold proclamation held by Jews and Christians alike, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” And Jesus went on, “The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Love God; love your neighbor. Such seemingly simple commandments, yet if you’ve ever watched some you love hurt themselves or others and not known how to respond, you know how complicated these are, how nuanced and situational and ripe for mistake and misinterpretation they can be. An act done in love can feel like hate, or what we think we do in love can come instead from our own self-interest. These commands to love are both too simple and too vast to be understood on our own. We can only see the world through our own limited experience, to love our neighbor we have to know their own experience. And to love God requires knowledge beyond knowing.

I grieve the way this morning's Gospel reading ended, "after that no one dared ask Jesus any questions." I wish the questions had continued. Not in the way of the earlier questions, those asked to trick and to trap and to prove, but in the way of the scribe's question, to learn, to teach, to challenge and to engage. To hear another's perspective in the world and to wonder about how it differs from one's own, and how their perspectives may have been formed from their experience, how love and faith can look different to each person, and how our love of God and neighbor can grow from knowing another's perspective.

So the challenge I hear for myself in this Gospel reading, and the challenge I give to all of you, in this time and season of conflict and division, is to not be afraid to ask questions. Yes, there are extremes, there are falsehoods that cannot and should not be reasoned with, the hatred-fueled violence of racism and anti-Semitism that we saw played out this week are examples of that. But the silence of fear gives space for those fringes to thrive, rather than being pushed to the edges where hatred belongs. I invite you this week to find someone you disagree with and have a conversation with them. Not to change their mind, and not to change your mind, but simply to learn more about what they think and what caused them to come to that conclusion. I will share with you that I had such a conversation last week, about one of the ballot propositions, and while my views were not changed by the dialogue, I found myself more deeply engaged by their questions than I had been before, and more committed to being engaged in the process, so that the result that I hope will come out of the vote is what actually emerges, a result that is freeing and life-giving and good for the largest amount of people. The conversation was frustrating, it made me angry, but it forced me out of my silo to see the sides of the argument I had been

missing, the gaps in my framework, and the real problems that still persisted. I came out of the conversation both clearer about my own opinion and with more respect for those whose vote will be different than mine, for from the conversation I know that while we want the same goal, our varying perspectives see different pathways forward. So we can disagree on how best to solve this, and yet still work together regardless of the result of the ballot proposal, because in the end the hope is the same. And our differing experiences bring up gaps in the other's argument, leading to more growth overall.

Death dwells in the silence, and as Jesus told the questioning Pharisees in the verse immediately before our reading this morning, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." So let's go make some noise. Amen.