

Rev. Mark Moline
Sermon October 28, 2018

Let us Pray: For I have seen violence and strife in the city. Day and night they go about the walls; damage and trouble are at its center; violence is within her. Therefore let the tears of our eyes, the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There are times when Episcopal priests are allowed – even encouraged – to deviate from the assigned readings and address pressing issues. I believe today is one of those times. I had a sermon about blind Bartimaeus prepared for this morning – put the finishing touches on it a little before 8 last night, and then turned on the TV to catch up on the news. By the second commercial break I turned the television off, set aside the Bartimaeus sermon, went through some past sermon files and started in on a new sermon for this morning.

I have known a lot of violence in my lifetime. I think that knowledge and that experience was one of those very personal and defining aspects of my law enforcement career, one that would ultimately lead to my call to the priesthood. However, my personal experience, all of those violence-induced sad and sinking feelings and memories, are no longer exclusively my own. I think especially since about the time of a place called Columbine, and then the World Trade Centers and then the Boston Marathon, and all of the other countless incidents of mass violence and terrorism -- somehow the whole nation now shares the awful experience of wanton and senseless violence.

The news is now so comprehensive - and the news this past week and yesterday once again carried too much pain. And I think a lot of folks are asking, just what kind of world are we giving our children and our grand-children? Back when Jesus first commissioned his apostles, He sent them out with the warning, See, I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves...” Two thousand years later, he still sends his church out amongst the wolves.

There is a pack of wolves outside those doors. Like every other urban area, and even some rural areas, Greenville / Spartanburg has its very own pack. For far too long we have danced with wolves bearing names like poverty, homelessness, hunger, illiteracy, racism, substance abuse and addiction, domestic abuse, child abuse, violent mental illness, terrorism and other wolves too numerous to name. Perhaps now some new wolves have joined the pack.

Somehow, it seems so important for us to sort out, identify, name and blame each and all of those wolves in our search for answers. We seem hell bent on destroying people in our attempt to get to the wolves. We have declared war on crime, war on illegal immigration, war on poverty, war on hunger, war on drugs and war on anyone who thinks differently than we do. Maybe all of these wars are necessary – I don’t know. But, I’m speaking to

you this morning as member's of Christ's extended body on earth... Have you noticed how unwise it is for sheep to declare war on wolves, - the sheep almost always lose?

Today, more than ever before – the church needs to be the church. We need to be the church, not exclusively from the safety of the fold, (which actually is not so safe any longer) not from the fold, but we need to be the church out there among the wolves. We must go out and face the wolves and we must teach what Christ taught, we must feed the hungry, refresh the thirsty, clothe the needy and visit those who are sick and in prison. Our time and our gentle presence are requested by Christ out there among those wolves. I think we are growing weary of waging and losing one social war after another. Jesus said “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Since Columbine, I've watched friends and neighbors, brothers and sisters carry a heavy burden. --- Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

We are surrounded by violence, Can the church be – -- dare we be a gentle and humble presence – there in the very midst of that violent wolf pack. One of the things that most worries me about the larger church, - is its almost total lack of gentleness. It seems to have traded gentleness for politics. Where is the gentleness of Christ? Sheep with razor sharp teeth can be as mean as wolves, and still not win the battle.

Contrary to popular belief, Gentleness and Humility are not synonyms for complacency and passivity. I'm not preaching weakness this morning. The church has been in the business of changing people's lives for two thousand years. It still has so much to offer our society and it desperately needs to be a distinct vital leading agent of change within this community. The church needs to be the church.

I think the church needs a new vision of itself. We need a renewed vision of high-profile humility – now that sounds like a contradiction of terms, “high profile humility” -- but many saints have proved and lived out a life of high-profile humility – that's why we call them saints. We need a renewed vision of assertive, pro-active gentleness – I'm not talking about an “in your face self-righteous pretence of gentleness” – but an “in our heart gentle nature of Christ”.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury wrote, “If Christians are satisfied with things the way they are, God's vision of what is possible will not be shared. There must be a divine discontent with what we find. There must be a desire to share Christ with a broken and fallen world.”