

Pentecost 3 June 9, 2024

Forty two years ago, an unidentified newborn was found dead by the side of the road in Northfield by two brothers waiting for the school bus. The baby was buried by the priest at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, the Rev. Frank Wismer III, who named him Matthew Issac Doe and buried the child in the Mount Hope Cemetery about three weeks after the discovery of the infant's body. Last week, the Vermont State Police issued a report that based on DNA evidence, they have finally been able to conclude that the baby's death was not a homicide. This report was picked up by various news outlets and I was meeting with the clergy team at St. Mary's when the story broke and we fielded inquiries from the media. We emphasized that this baby was a child of God to be treated with dignity and that St. Mary's had stepped in at the tragic time to support a grieving community.

Then, at the Sunday service last week, Ernest "Buster" Caswell III, one of the two brothers who found the baby, came to St. Mary's, and he was very distraught. Rev. Lee Crawford comforted him and the congregation welcomed him warmly. He stayed for the entire service and had some long and meaningful conversations with clergy and lay members afterwards at Coffee Hour. Later, two members of the parish went to the cemetery and they ran into Buster and were able to give him more support at the graveside.

This very tragic story with the faithful and caring pastoral response of St. Mary's, both decades ago and still in the present, to me is a testament to the church being present in community and our understanding that we are all children of God, to be cared for and treated with dignity. I was both amazed and very grateful.

Prayer: Most Merciful and glorious God, we give you thanks this day for your loving word and ask that it may inspire us in the days to come. This we ask in the name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Our lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures and from the Christian writings this morning take up topics of leadership, authority and the deep divisions in society that these issues can bring about. And of course, it is impossible, I think, to hear them and not to reflect on the debates surging in our nation in this election year, in a country that certainly feels ever more deeply divided than we have ever known. I believe, that it is useful, perhaps to take a step back and to get some perspective as well. This past week we have seen the commemorations of the 80th anniversary of the Allied Invasion of Normandy, when the troops stormed the French beaches to begin the decisive battle to put an end to the fascist tyranny of the Nazi regime. That remembrance once again, especially as the veterans of that battle are almost all gone now, reminds us that the world was indeed strongly divided between the forces of good and evil, and that the conflict that engulfed the globe and extinguished the lives of millions is not so far in the distant past. Of course, there is also the history of racial division and the great need we have for racial healing in our nation that is another graphic example of division in our world. Great social divisions are not a new phenomenon, of course, and the Biblical lessons today show this as well.

For example, we heard this morning of the pleas of the people of Israel for a king to rule them, and despite Samuel's warning of the oppression and tyranny a king will bring into their lives, the people still clamor for a king. As Samuel knows, this is the inherent flaw of the people: they have not seen that God has provided for them, liberating them from the bitter slavery in Egypt, watching over them through the journey in the wilderness. But to keep up with the Joneses, to be like the other nations, the people of Israel seek a king, despite the stern warning of Samuel of what will befall them. With great rejoicing, Saul is appointed as king, showing Israel's unwillingness to put their whole trust in God's providence for them. This course will take Israel into a divided future, eventually with two kingdoms, and the people often divided against their rulers, sometimes moving closer to God but often, as we hear in the incessant cries of the prophets, once more moving away from God and only seeking their own pleasure and self-indulgence.

In the Gospel story from Mark, this sense of division is even more extreme: Jesus and his followers are overwhelmed by the adoring, but very needy, crowds. His own family doesn't know what is going on and they try to hold him back. Some people think he's lost his marbles.

And then the religious authorities try to stir things up, hurling accusations that Jesus is demonic! Jesus tries to show the absurdity of these accusations: that he is not demonic because he is working against the demons that oppress the people. Jesus notes the inherent weakness and falsehood about these divisions; in words later quoted by Abraham Lincoln on the eve of the civil War, Jesus says, “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Those words, of course, could well be used today, with the divisions we see in the world around us, both in our own society, to the nations of Africa, Europe, the Middle East and most tragically the Holy Land.

The most interesting, and certainly the most important part of this lesson, is contained in the few lines at the end: harking back to his family, some in the crowd mention to Jesus that his family is calling for him. Jesus takes this opportunity to say: “Who are my mother and my brothers?...whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” This is both totally unexpected and extraordinary: Jesus is at once disavowing his family and at the same time extending the very understanding of family. This is not unlike a more contemporary understanding: here in June during Pride month, we are reminded of some ways that members of the LGBTQ+ community the experience of many have been severely strained by their biological families, but they have found support in a chosen family, those who can provide support and care and love. Jesus’ teaching here I think is a good precursor of this: Jesus says that we are gathered together and united in our purpose to follow God. Remember Jesus’ teaching that the two commands we are called to follow are to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In some ways these two commandments are two sides of the same coin or another way to put it is that they are really the same commandment: by loving God’s people, loving our neighbors as ourselves we are loving God. For Jesus, this is what brings us together, living fully in this love, using this love to bring us together, walking in the light of this love as Jesus shows us the way. This means living seeking out the other, seeking to live by this love, the love that Jesus gives us so graciously and fully.

I know that often I preach about love Jesus calls for us to live with for our neighbors, that many of my sermons go around and around (or maybe on and on!) about living fully in the love of God; that as God loves us so we are called to love others and to reach out in a loving embrace as Jesus reaches out in a loving embrace from the hard wood of the cross. Today, in the light of the deep divisions hinted at in the Scriptural lessons and that are so evident daily in our society ad throughout our world, this emphasis I place in many of my sermons on following Jesus’ way of love seems almost naive, sort of quaint, but not really having much meaning or effect in the midst of the deep divisions, long standing divisions that seem to have no way out. This call from Jesus is to put our trust in God’s love, to share that love that is given to us so graciously and abundantly with our neighbors; to trust in the way God who has liberated our spiritual ancestors from the bondage of their day and to seek to follow God now in our own times. This might seem a weak mushy response to the deep forces of division in our times, but I’ve seen it happen: in the little story I told at the start of this sermon, the church was there, followers of Christ were there to take an abandoned child’s remains, to give a proper and dignified burial, to mark even this child as a child of God, with a name, an identity and with care. And now, even more than four decades later, to comfort the community, to reach out in care to Butch, and to gather in that way of love, to be the sisters and brothers in Christ, to be the friends of Jesus bringing life to the divine love now in our own day. This is the call Jesus brings to us today; a call to walk in the way of love and to do God’s will together, bringing a visible unity into our too divided world. As we come together as one people, gathering at the Altar, taking our communion together, may this love unity be further strengthened in our lives. Thanks be to God for this grace and thanks be to Christ for bringing us together by this loving call. Amen.