



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 8, 2022
ACTS 9:36-43; PSALM 23; REVELATION 7:9-17; JOHN 10:22-30

PROTEST AS PASTORAL RESPONSE

Revelation 7:9-17 *[I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."]*

One of the quotes I keep on my desktop is from the late dean of Salisbury Cathedral, Sydney Evans, who wrote this nearly fifty years ago:

A cathedral is both a protest and a proclamation...

a protest against all ideologies and political systems which deny or diminish the spirituality, dignity and true liberty of human persons,

and a proclamation of the Christian Way as an invitation to pilgrimage, ... by which human beings can find help in

their search for the answer to their fundamental questions: 'Who am I?' 'What may I hope?' 'What should I do?'"ⁱ

I used that quote in the liturgical minister training this past week as an invitation for us all to frame our work of worship with these missional purposes in mind—a cathedral is both a protest and a proclamation. We are all liturgical dancers invited to move to the song of God's grace flowing in our lives, prompting us in turn to share the healing balm of God's love into a broken hurting world.

This wayfinding to dignity for all is central to our existence and this cathedral's purpose. The work of liturgy is the path we take to discover this truth for ourselves, and for the world. It is our common work—the work of the people, guided by bedrock tenets of faith, and by rites that reveal that dignifying love as the life-giving way of abundant life.

But..., it bears saying that the tenets of faith are nothing more than “sound and fury, signifying nothing...”ⁱⁱ unless they are translatable to the dignified experience where we discover God inviting us to ask our fundamental questions: Who am I? What may I hope for? What should I do?

The Church is not an ideological or political system, although it has, through much of its history, behaved as if it were, much to its detriment and the suffering of many who

were denied the dignity and liberty of their full humanity.

And certainly the Church has across much of its history aligned itself with the ideologies and political systems of the powers and principalities that have seen fit to subjugate, often in God's name. When it has cut that path, violence inevitably follows in its wake. The tenets of such a faith don't translate into life-giving dignity.

This cathedral, if it is to be faithful to its mission, must be a protest against all ideologies and political systems which deny or diminish the dignity and liberty of all, and this cathedral must be a proclamation of pastoral concern. Indeed, our pastoral sensibilities must guide our politics, or we risk becoming just another ideological system, and the only thing I am sure of if we do that is there will be violence that follows.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, when we heed the voice of the Christ who speaks gentle pastoral wisdom in our direction, we are invited once more to consider who in our calculus is outside the bounds of human dignity. Or more to the point: what or who exactly are we protesting?

Christ the Good Shepherd consistently holds space for life-giving dignity for all—he staked his life on it; this cathedral should too. Jesus protested ideologies denying the dignity for all, but he did so moved by the pastoral pain he felt when he saw suffering.

So what I am about to say arises from a pastor's heart, not political hegemony, and I hope you will hear it as such. For a decade now, I have resisted the impulse to degrade this pulpit with ideological righteousness; I have no desire to begin now. But in light of this week's swirl of ideological spin surrounding reproductive rights, I feel obliged to say a few things guided by pastoral insights I have gained in my twenty years as a practicing physician, sitting with women facing difficult decisions, and now nearly twenty years as a priest. The fact that we observe Mother's Day today is not lost on me. I am by no means the best qualified given my gender and station in life; but here I am, as the dean of this cathedral, and I am willing to stake my life on what I am about to say.

First, you should know that the Episcopal Church has repeatedly since 1967 adopted formal position statements affirming full and equal access to health care for all genders, and that access to decisions surrounding reproductive rights must be reserved to the individual in consultation with their health care providers.ⁱⁱⁱ This includes an action at General Convention 2018, when I voted in the majority adopting a statement "that equitable access to women's health care, including women's reproductive health care, is an integral part of a woman's struggle to assert her dignity and worth as a human being." Here in 2022, if I were voting again, I would move to expand the language to afford such access to women and to any gender

whose dignity is denied by lack of access or autonomy over one's body and health.

What is unfolding in our nation's system of governance is an abrogation of that dignity, a backsliding with destructive consequences. That is a political statement informed by a pastor's heart.

The struggle to assert women's dignity and worth as human beings is not new. To cite a few distressing examples: No state outlawed marital rape until 1975; the last states did not until 1993. No man was found liable for sexual harassment until 1977. A woman could be fired from her job simply for becoming pregnant until a protective law was passed in 1978.^{iv}

So there is grief felt this week when a group of ideologues seem poised to dishonor the autonomy and rights of humans based on gender, with far-reaching implications for many who can feel the vortex of violence swirling around them already.

It's helpful to remember that grief can often express as anger and denial and depression...all understandable because something has been lost, is being lost, and it is precious. And I am sorry for that.

But you need not experience this in isolation. We can make our way together—protesting, proclaiming, guided by the Good Shepherd and his pastoral heart of care for you and me, and for all. Know that your priests are

available to sit with you and hold the space with you as you grieve.

What I will also say is that whatever actions unfold in this nation in the coming weeks, I believe it is a manifestation of a deeper evil at work in our time, and what I know about evil is that it wants to be seen as good, and it wants nothing more than for good people to turn on one another. Evil feeds off the violence and the hardened heart from which it arises. Hence, the invitation for this cathedral to protest from a pastoral heart informing our politics, rather than the reverse. We can do this, friends, and find our way together.

And finally, to those who fought for and have guarded reproductive rights and all other rights not “guaranteed by the Constitution,”^v I suspect you are weary, exhausted even by all this. To you, and to any with ears to hear, I would point you to the passage from Revelation this morning, to the heavenly scene—where the evangelist is asked “who

are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

And he receives the answer to his fundamental question of hope, and shares it with us: “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have been washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb...”

They worship God within God’s temple—that is, they are liturgical dancers invited to move to the song of God’s grace—“they will hunger and thirst no more, the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

So bring your questions, bring your hearts, bring your bodies, and your very beings, and know the Shepherd honors you, invites you, claims you, dignifies you, and loves you, fully and forever. Amen. Amen.

ⁱ This quote was shared with me by a bishop in The Anglican Church of Canada, citing Sydney Evans. I am unable to locate the verifiable source so attribution here is as I received it.

ⁱⁱ Shakespeare’s MacBeth Act V.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ogr/summary-of-general-convention-resolutions-on-abortion-and-womens-reproductive-health/>

^{iv} <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/whats-missing-from-the-drafted-decision-to-overturn-roe-v-wade>

^v The language in Justice Alito’s leaked opinion that justifies reversing Roe v. Wade but has perilous implications for a host of hard-won victories for human rights and dignity.