



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 25, 2024
JOSHUA 24: 1-2, 14-18; PSALM 34:15-22; EPHESIANS 6:10-20; JOHN 6:56-59

SHAKING HANDS AND SERVING GOD'S PURPOSE

Ephesians 6:10-20 *[Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.]*

As some of you may know, a group of people from Saint Mark's recently returned from a pilgrimage in Ireland, where we walked in the footsteps of our forebears of faith dating back 1700 years. St. Patrick, Brigid, Columba, Kevin and Ciaran, and countless others whose names are unknown to us invite a deeply inspiring consideration on our Celtic Christian heritage.

An important part of pilgrimage as a spiritual practice is to make it in community, with others whom we get to know better and come to love more deeply. Last Sunday, on my return here, I noticed that several from the trip converged and sat together, a witness to the bonds of affection that are strengthened by the experience. It warmed my heart to see this,

even as I chuckled at the thought of the mischief they might conjure if all together.

A third element of making pilgrimage is to engage the people who live in these sacred places today, and nowhere on our journey was this aspect more palpably embraced than in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where the dreadful legacy of hatred and mistrust continue to run roughshod over the city's beautiful people who seem hellbent on perpetuating the conflict for generations to come.

It was a sobering day spent listening to people's stories of fractured pain. My purpose today is not to unpack that centuries-old reality and the causes for it (good documentaries are available if interested).¹

But I do want to say two things to our community here: first, the disheartening fact that it is our Christian siblings on both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland who are promulgating the narratives that refuse a real and lasting peace, and that should give us pause. And, secondly, that the trajectory which Northern Ireland has taken over time is uncannily echoed as template for the Israel-Palestine conflict where peace seems so elusive, and I can see similar seeds of mistrust germinating in our country as well. This is where I want to focus.

We who gather here this morning have decisions to make about how we choose to respond and react in such times, but history

tells us this is not new, and, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

This is not a doomsday sermon; I believe with all my heart there is hope, and I mean this to be an instructive exhortation, drawing on the Letter to the Ephesians as inspiration.

We hear the concluding verses to the letter this morning, but over the last several weeks, we've been making our way through the remarkable letter. I commend it to you to read straight through its six chapters, which would take less than half an hour, with a caveat that chapter five is likely a later addition, has problematic culturally-laden language, but can be gathered up and redeemed by the lead sentence: *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ* (5.21).

I'm happy to have a conversation with anyone offline to unpack the rest of that chapter.

Taken as a whole, the letter is an appeal to Christians in Ephesus, and by extension everywhere, including us, to be resocialized to see our identity as being, first and foremost, members of God's household, then secondarily as citizens, and to live by the tenets of baptismal purpose and gospel-informed conduct.

Ephesus was a major city in the eastern part of the Roman empire, distant from the capital, but significant as a seaport, center of trade, and for its civic engagement by learned people who aspired to make their city and region better.

¹ PBS has a five-part series which I highly recommend <https://www.pbs.org/show/once-upon-time-northern-ireland/>

They just didn't all agree on how to best do that.

The analogies between ancient Ephesus and Seattle, far flung from the capital city, can be easily drawn.

The letter comes to those in the city who have become Christian, seeking to shape their lives by the narrative of Jesus Christ. There is a litany of instruction about how to do this, how to be Christ-like in a very complicated setting:

- *Speak the truth in love*
- *Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.*
- *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*
- *Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*
- *Putting away falsehood, speak the truth to our neighbors...be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.*
- *Do not grieve the Holy Spirit... with which you were marked [for a purpose].*

And then in today's passage, this unsettling imagery of putting on the armor of God, but it is important to note that this is defensive armor, not offensive, and the purpose is to clothe yourself in the Spirit, to be so immersed in the spiritual practices to which you are

called, that you feel them protecting you from evil.

Evil is real, friends. And nowhere is it more delighted with itself than when it diverts people from their innate goodness, when it alienates us from what we know to be right, and good and true, when it convinces us to grasp ahold of the narrative of otherness so fiercely that we lose our capacity to reach out our hands in love.

Our vocation, it seems to me, is to embrace this exhortation of gentleness and humility in ways that invite us to behave differently, within the context of a very complicated social and political landscape.

So, for example, when a political candidate is wounded by an assassin's bullet, we don't cheer or make fun; we pray for that person, and for the one who shot him, and for our nation where such things all too easily become bloodsport for comedians and us all.

When an older man is forced to yield his position of power, we don't cheer or make fun; we hold him in our hearts, recognizing the ego-bruising humiliation that such a tide-turning decision required.

When someone wants to frame our political discourse as a zero-sum-game, we put away falsehood, we speak the truth to our neighbors...we use our anger to redirect or resist, but we do not fall prey to sin, which is to say, we do not hold the grudge that hardens over time to enmity, and before we know it, we are Belfast petting hatreds that justify killing one another in the name of righteous anger. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.

I could go on, but I trust you get the point. Our vocation as Christian citizens is to embody a different way, and I am convinced this way of Christ can and will heal our nation and the world, and us along the way. We shape our identity in formation, which is why we offer the Wisdom School, and Radix small groups, which will focus on peacemaking this fall, and the full array of formation offerings in this community.

That day in Belfast a few weeks ago, after spending the morning walking both side of the divide, which set our teeth on edge, we met with poet and theologian Padraig O'Tuama who shared some poems to invite perspective that holds onto hope, to contextualize the conflict there, and by extension, the capacity for war and peace among all people.

He read his poem, *Shaking Hands*, which I will share in part here to conclude, trusting that you will imagine the act of shaking hands as metaphor for a deeper work we all have, and the deeper peace for which we all long.

Shaking Hands

Because what's the alternative?

Because of courage.

Because of loved ones lost.

Because no more.

...

Because it takes a second to say hate, but it takes longer, much longer, to be a great leader.

Much, much longer.

Because shared space without human touching doesn't amount to much.

Because it's easier to speak to your own than to hold the hand of someone whose side has been previously described, proscribed, denied.

Because it is tough.

Because it is tough.

Because it is meant to be tough, and this is the stuff of memory, the stuff of hope, the stuff of gesture, and meaning and leading.

...

Because lives have been lost.

Because lives have been taken.

Because to be bereaved is to be troubled by grief.

Because more than two troubled peoples live here.

Because I know a woman whose hand hasn't been shaken since she was a man.

Because shaking a hand is only a part of the start.

Because I know a woman whose touch calmed a man whose heart was breaking.

Because privilege is not to be taken lightly.

...

Because some people love what you stand for, and for some, if you can, they can.

Because solidarity means a common hand.

Because a hand is only a hand; so hang onto it.

So join your much discussed hands.

We need this; for one small second.

So touch.

So lead.²

² "Shaking Hands" Originally published in *Sorry for your Troubles* (Canterbury Press, 2013). Copyright © 2013 by

Pádraig Ó Tuama. Accessed <https://poets.org/poem/shaking-hands>, August 21, 2024.