

Target Practice
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2015
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Texts: I Samuel 17; 2 Cor. 6; Mark 4

I came up with the title for this sermon this past Wednesday afternoon, which was just before the terrible events unfolded at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. On Thursday, I like many of you was paying attention to those events in South Carolina, and I wasn't really thinking about my sermon – it didn't dawn on me til later in the day once the bulletins were printed, that a title like 'Target Practice' could sound very provocative, or much worse sound insensitive, given the circumstances. I certainly don't mean the title to be insensitive in any way – our prayers and hearts and grief are joined to our sisters and brothers there; but there is now no way around the title of this sermon or the events in South Carolina being provocative – the violence at Emanuel stuns us and provokes a response – the racial hatred unleashed in a house of worship changes the trajectory of our national discourse and alters the trajectory of this sermon.

Perhaps we need to start with David, David and Goliath – it is a peculiar story to know what to do with: the handsome young boy slaying ('slaying' sounds more epic than killing) the behemoth Goliath. If you'd like to allegorize the story, you've already been beaten to the punch (so to speak), by our culture: 'David and Goliath' has become the prototype for the unlikely hero succeeding against the odds – the little guy pitted against the giant, whatever the circumstances, and we root for the underdog; I do that – you do that – David vs. Goliath. It's a deeply imbedded cultural moral taken from the story. But the David and Goliath story as told in scripture is not an allegory – it is a very violent story. The incident between David and Goliath stands as this singular moment that might mitigate the violence – perhaps just this one hero taking out the villain will resolve this battle with the Philistines, will bring peace; but read on and the cycle of violence just continues with David as a part of it. And if you want to really skip forward, David turns into Goliath himself – the worst kind, a Goliath who wins – as later David uses his royal power to have a helpless man killed so that David can take his wife. The moral of this story seems to be that violence by its very nature perpetuates itself; violence has within its nature the power to bring

victory, but never peace. And yet, there stands in the story, this almost bizarre phrase, given the setting: “the LORD does not save by sword or spear” – that’s what it says; David & Goliath.

The passage from 2 Corinthians speaks about violence and weapons too, did you notice? The church in that time sounds quite a bit like a David, you could say, in how the situation is described – afflicted with physical violence and defined by circumstances of weakness from the Goliath powers of the day. So, it is time to fight back, it is time to arm yourself, Paul says, with weapons – with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left – the weapons of purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness, love, truth, all in the power of God. These are the weapons – these are weapons? – in the face of the power and violence of the world, these are the weapons of which Paul speaks - they are the fruits and gifts of the Spirit, given by the Risen Christ to the church – that is the arsenal of which Paul speaks.

How does that sound to us – those weapons? the power of patience, kindness, holiness, love, purity, truth as what God gives us to find our way in this world today? – how does it sound really, if we are honest with ourselves? Sounds nice...perhaps a bit too optimistic but at least appealing... or worse does it sound naïve, irrelevant, even futile given all that is going on in our world? How does that sound to us – those weapons?

Jesus and his disciples – there in the boat – there in the storm; the disciples panicking, Jesus sleeping (did you notice the detail – Jesus was asleep, on a cushion! – really Jesus?!) The disciples share their panic with Jesus “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!” ‘Peace – be still’, Jesus says to the storm; to the disciples too, don’t you think? – dead calm. ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’ Great awe: ‘Who is this, who even the wind and sea obey?’

Let’s notice this about that story – Jesus speaks to calm the storm, it is by his word that it stops – the power and peace of God are contained in the word Jesus speaks. And here’s what I think we need to realize about that – the point is not that this storm stops so suddenly; the point is that the word of Jesus is the only power and peace that can stop it. “Jesus, don’t you care if we are perishing?” – ‘Peace, be still’ ‘Tell me, my disciples, how did the fear work out for you? try faith...try listening as well as the wind and the sea.’ Should we ask too: ‘Who is this...?’

We live in the time of David and Goliath, a time in which cycles of violence are entrenched and destructive and perpetuated: the violent cycles of hatred, divisions of religion and race, of nations and peoples; the legacies of violence through the generations of slavery and injustice and intolerance, the teaching of hatred bearing insidious fruit still in the horror of Charleston; the violence of inequity and economic disparity; violence even toward God's creation. Who is the David, who is the Goliath? who is the problem, who must be destroyed for the solution? which enemy, which war? the cycles go on.

We live in the time of the church, but we can only be the church if we see ourself as David, as in the place of and standing with the powerless and afflicted; AND we can only be the church if in the midst of the cycles of violence we then reach for different weapons: the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left – purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness, love, truth, the very power of God. And faith does not say ‘well, those are the only weapons we have’ – faith says ‘those are the only weapons’, because it is the fruits and gifts of God's Spirit that target what is truly broken in this world, rather than targeting one another. “Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?” - the Lord does not save by sword or spear...or by panic or fear...or by making it all better: but by faith that it is only the word of our Lord that brings peace.

In Charleston, SC, we give thanks to God for those who lived by faith even as their lives were taken by hate at Emanuel AME Church – ‘Emanuel’ means ‘God with us’ – and they are a witness to us of the power of such faith. God is with us, and in Jesus Christ we are called to live by that faith – not because it is practical or effective or superior or ethereal – but because it is the way of life, and it is the only power that speaks to us and our world it's true calling of Peace.

We with our sisters and brothers there need some nourishment this day in that calling – the nourishment of peace rather than solutions, of faith over fear, of weapons for life not death – the nourishment of the one whose word is Peace. Thanks be to God. AMEN.