

Season after Pentecost - Reconciliation

June 18/19, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 15: 25-32; 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21

“Ambassadors of Christ. Ministers of Reconciliation.”

Let this written and spoken word lead us to the living, Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

It was December 2012 and Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber was preparing the traditional service of readings and carols for the first Sunday after Christmas Day. During the service, nine scripture passages are read tracing God’s promise and presence from creation to the birth of Jesus. Between the readings, Christmas carols are sung. The pastor gets a holiday break from preaching. The congregation gets a break from the pastor preaching. And everyone gets to sing Christmas carols. It’s a great plan. “Until,” Pastor Nadia writes “children are killed in the elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut eleven days before Christmas and nobody knows what to think or what to do or what to say, and so they come to church hoping to at least know how to pray.”¹

On the Saturday before that 2012 service of readings and carols, Pastor Nadia told her new intern, Alex, they would be adding another reading: the story of Herod’s Slaughter of the Innocent Children as he tried to see that Jesus was killed. She also had just thought that during the prayers of the people, they would read the names and ages of the 26 teachers and children who died at Sandy Hook Elementary School and ring a bell after each. She wanted to know what her intern thought.

“You mean twenty-seven?” Alex replied.

“I’m sorry, what’s that?” she asked

“Adam Lanza. The shooter. He died too.”

“No way,” she said before she even thought about it.

“Um, Nadia?” She didn’t need to hear anything else. She knew he was right.

She wrote, “The other aspect of the story of Jesus’ birth is that, as John’s gospel says, a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. God chose to enter a time as violent and faithless as our own, yes. But the other thing we must confess is that the light of Christ cannot, will not, shall not ever be overcome by the darkness. Not by Herod, and not by Adam Lanza. The light of Christ is so bright that it shines even for me and even for them.”²

“Fine,” she finally relented, “but I am registering my opposition to God’s grace.”

“I’m sure God is super hurt about it, “ Alex replied.

Two days later, they stood in front of the congregation. Alex solemnly struck a bell for each of the names of dead teachers and children. “Charlotte Bacon, six” A bell rang. “Daniel Barden, seven.” Another bell. “Olivia Engel, six.” Each ring of the bell would shake her insides as she thought of every 6-year-old she had ever known and imagined them lying on a classroom floor. She couldn’t read that final name right away.

She had to reach deep into her “convictions in order to find the mercy to do so.” She wrote, “If I couldn’t also speak the truth that God came to save *us*, all of us, that God created us in God’s image and that lives we’d rather extinguish are still precious to their maker and that the North Star that so brightly lit the way for the Magi to find the Christ child shone for them and Herod and me and Charlotte Bacon and Adam Lanza, then I really had no business being a preacher that day. So I dug deep to speak the truth of God. ‘And in obedience to your command to love the enemy and pray for those who persecute us’ — her voice cracked as if the courage were draining out of it — ‘Adam Lanza, twenty.’ The final bell rang.”³

Last Sunday a national news program ended with the names of the dead shot in Orlando, Florida scrolling on the screen. The next day they repeated this tribute with the addition of their ages and photographs. I could hear a bell ring after each name and photo. They looked like people I’ve seen, people I’ve known. They’d been out for a night of partying and dancing. Regardless of your opinion of homosexuality or nightclubbing or drag queens, 49 individuals would not be able to call their Dad for Father’s Day because of the hate and madness of Omar Mateen, 29. Another bell rings. Five days later, on June 17th, we’d remember one year ago when nine worshipers were killed by someone they had welcomed into their Charleston, South Carolina church. Yet more bells ring.

This week my mind wandered back to the Keynote Speaker at this year’s DE-MD Synod Assembly, Rev. David Daubert, a coach and consultant to faith-based organizations and leaders. At one point he turned a critical eye on the ELCA slogan – God’s Work. Our Hands. It’s good, he said, but it’s not enough. There should be another set of words added. “God’s Word. Our Voice.” Our neighbors, towns, cities, nations need to hear who this God is that we work for. They need to hear God’s word of grace, love, forgiveness and mercy. Or, as St. Paul put it in our reading today, we are to be

ambassadors of Christ, speaking on behalf of the One we serve, using our voice and lives to represent Christ's ways and say what Christ would say. God's Word. Our Voice. That word in its most simplest and complex form is love. The love of God whose power and aim is reconciliation – the mending of all that is broken in creation. We are ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation.

That's no easy task in our current circumstances where it seems we are much more interested in division, "us and them," distrust, accusations, disparaging opponents and separation. Yet Paul reminds us: "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them. So from now on we regard no one from a human point of view." (2 Cor. 5: 14-16) Living for Christ not our selves — God's work. Our Hands. God's Word. Our Voice — IS our reason and purpose for being. So hear God's Word. Whether you are democrat or republican, whether you are pro or anti gun control, whether you do or do not believe homosexuality is God's will, whether you are pro or anti Trump or Clinton, whether you call yourself a conservative or liberal – this is God's Word as revealed in and by our Lord Jesus: "People have value because Christ has died for them. People, whoever they are, whether they have responded to Christ or not — Christ died for everyone ---- are treasured by God. Through Christ, everyone, *everyone* has value . . . So we do not need to inquire whether persons are fellow Christians before we know that they deserve to be treated with respect. They are valuable because Christ has died for them . . . Love of others is not an option for which we may or may not decide . . . We-who-are-loved [by God] love others."⁴ It's that simple and that hard.

A news reporter was interviewing the pastor of an Orlando church. She finally asked the minister what he would say from the pulpit since his particular church believed homosexuality was sinful. I held my breath. What would this Christian pastor say was God's Word before a national radio audience? In sum, this is what he said. Even if we disagree about something we still are to love. We aren't to hate or hurt those who differ from us or our ideas. We're commanded to love.⁵ Those are the words of an ambassador of Christ, a minister of reconciliation. We are not our own — we are God's children, ambassadors and ministers of reconciliation. I, for one, think it's time the church and I to take those titles and that love a bit more seriously. When I think, speak

about or engage those whose differ from me or my treasured opinions, how is it that I can show love and mean it!? When other begin to talk in demeaning stereotypes or judgmental tones, how will I not only resist joining in but be an alternative, loving voice. Love is God's Work and Word and it's not optional. Love is God's Work and Word seeking to be set loose through our Hands and Voice. God's Adversary is loud and persuasive. Ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation, it is long past time for good people who value God's love over all else to speak out lovingly, even though we may not know how at first. God's Work. Our Hands. God's Word. Our Voice. It's not just a slogan. It's our way of life. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 6/18/16

ENDNOTES

1. Nadia Bolz-Weber, Accidental Saints NY: Convergent Books, 2015 p.72

2. Bolz-Weber, p79

3. Bolz-Weber, pp 78-79

4. J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians" New Interpreter's Bible, Volume XI Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000 p. 98, 99

5. Interview during NPR special coverage of the Orlando shooting on the afternoon of Sunday, June 12. I did not note the name or church of the pastor.