

3 Epiphany, Year C: 27 January 2013

This morning we hear of Jesus standing up in the synagogue at Nazareth, reading from the prophet Isaiah and then applying what he reads to himself.

This is the first picture of Jesus' ministry we get in Luke, and the evangelist uses it to emphasize Jesus' authority in addressing people about God and God's plan.

Really, the whole gospel is summed up in the passage we hear this morning: God's promises of salvation find their fulfillment among us in Jesus, especially in his ministry to the poor, the vulnerable, those on the margins of society.

The Isaian passages that the evangelist has Jesus proclaim underscore forgiveness, restoration, new beginning, faith in the sovereignty of God, and conviction that the structures of social and economic life must reflect God's reign, God's priorities, not those of humankind.

The rest of the book will only flesh this out, along with *our* responsibility to appropriate this message in our own lives as followers of Jesus.

It seems important to me that the words of Jesus sink in deep to our braced-for-winter, post-Christmas hearts.

The message of Epiphany is that Jesus himself is *our* welcome news, *our* anointed one, *our* promise that God might enter in and liberate us to our fullest humanity, that we might take the places prepared for us as co-creators with God.

Those of us who gather here have chosen to be part of a spiritual tradition inspired by the living spirit of Jesus, and have promised to live our lives in a manner worthy of him, on behalf of the whole people of God.

Through baptism we too were anointed with the Holy Spirit, who resides within us, joining with our spirit, enabling us to live fully into our God given gifts and do extraordinary things for the sake of love.

And we hear that in this morning's Gospel, as Jesus stands in our very midst and welcomes us, inviting us to *join* with him in fulfilling the promises and purposes of God as members of one body.

Each of us members of one body; all of us the whole people of God.

This is the message of Nehemiah, the message of Paul, the message of Jesus.

What is made clear in these passages is that there is no such thing as an individual Jew or an individual Christian.

Any promise of God is made to the whole people together and individually only as part of God's people.

This is not easy for us to understand or accept,
because of the long tradition of individualism in which we live.
Rooted in Classical Greek and Roman thought,
on through the Renaissance and Reformation and down to the present,
most of our sense of ourselves has been as separated, distinct individuals.
Each of us personally responsible for our acts, our faith, our relationship to God.
Now, to some extent that is true,
but this is not the way the Bible looks at people.
The Bible always looks at individual people,
even an Abraham or a Sarah, a Miriam or a Moses,
as part of the people of God,
as being himself or herself most clearly and completely
not alone, not as an individual,
but in the context of the body of the people of God.
In the Old Testament this is expressed in terms of being one of "the chosen people."
In the New Testament it is expressed in terms of being part of the "Body of Christ."
And this is not easy for us, because our culture has taught us
to look at ourselves and others as being most completely ourselves
when we stand alone, uncommitted, uninvolved, uncluttered by other relationships.
This is, I think, what makes many of our current national struggles so difficult,
as we grapple as a nation, as a community, as a church, as individuals
with what action we will take on such pressing and vital issues as gun control,
economic disparity, who will have access to health care, and prejudice of all kinds.
On the one hand the arguments are framed as a matter of individual rights
and on the other from the standpoint of what freedoms must we give up as individuals
to live more faithfully as the whole people of God.

It is this communal understanding of our relationship to God
that shaped my responses to last month's tragic shooting in Connecticut.
My first thought was a kind of wounded horror
that these emergent children were killed so brutally
and that the children around them were terrorized as well.
I grieved, of course, for the adults too,
but it was the loss of the children—the lives not lived, the hopes extinguished—
that touched me first.

My thoughts moved next to the parents.
Even as a god-parent, if you are involved intimately in the life of a child
you are emotionally exposed.
Not only can I not fully take in the way the children were traumatized;
I cannot even begin to grasp the pain experienced by their parents.

And then from the parents my thoughts went to the shooter.
While I resist the temptation to speculate about his mental or emotional state,
it's hard to imagine someone carrying out such an act
who wasn't in an awful lot of psychic pain themselves.

We reflexively turn to calling such people “evil,”
as if in so doing we mark them as somehow different from us.
Was the shooter “evil”?
In the sense that he caused a lot of innocent suffering, yes I suppose he was.
But can we call him “evil” as a way of
excluding him or his actions from the realm of humanity?
No, I don’t believe we can.
We need to understand his action—and the actions of all violent people—
as a part of what it means to be human.
We are all members of one body, all bound in relationship to God and one another.
To understand is not to excuse.
Let’s not apologize for the shooter,
but let’s not try to pretend that he’s someone other than us, either.
If he was mentally ill, he was also a member of a family,
and we know that existing laws make it very difficult for families
to control or institutionalize their violent members.

And thinking about “us” makes me ask the last, the harder question.
Why do we as a society tolerate these massacres in increasing numbers?
These mass shootings are happening with increasing frequency,
and they seem more and more to be targeted directly against children.
What does it say about us as a society
that we continue to tolerate so much violence against children?
What does it say about us, as a community of human beings,
that we are willing to put our children (not to mention their teachers)
in so much jeopardy?
In every school I know they have lockdown drills,
and the threat of invasive gun violence is taken very seriously.
What kind of a society would let itself get to this point,
to where teachers and students routinely have to practice
what they will do when a shooter comes on campus?
If you stand back from it for a minute,
you realize that our continued shared tolerance
of this violence directed against our children is insane.

All of which leads me, finally, to ask the Gospel question:
what are we, as people of faith, to do?
Reflecting on what I have said so far this morning,
I hope you already have at least a sense of my answer to that question.
Share what you have, live honorably,
value the well-being of the other person as highly as your own.
We can make our ethical dilemmas seem more complicated than they really are.
In today’s Gospel, we’re asked, simply, to live mutually and honorably
and compassionately for the well-being of all of God’s creation,
and to do so in the name of Christ.

Which leads me to say: enough is enough.
As followers of Jesus, we have the moral obligation
to stand for and with the victims of gun violence and to work to end it.
We have tolerated school shootings, mall shootings, theater shootings,
sniper shootings, workplace shootings, temple and church shootings,
urban neighborhood shootings, for far too long.
The massacre of these 28 people in Connecticut is, for me at least, the last straw.
And I believe it is for you.
Enough is enough.
The Christian community—indeed the entire American faith community—
can no longer tolerate this persistent and escalating gun violence
directed against our brothers and sisters,
God's beloved children.
Enough is enough.

For a variety of reasons our political culture has been
unwilling and unable to address the question of gun control,
but now it is time that you and I, as followers of Jesus, help them to do that.
President Obama has called for "meaningful action" on the issue;
so has our presiding bishop; so has the Episcopal General Convention.
We know from experience that such calls often go unheeded.
But what if this time, you and I took up this issue
and wouldn't put it down until something was done?
I pray that this community will help in crafting and taking that action.
Our political leaders need to know that there are people in America
who will serve as a counterweight to the gun lobby,
who will stand together with our leaders and support them
as they act to take assault weapons off the streets.
We are led by one who died at the hand of human violence;
we know something about innocent suffering;
and we know that our job is to heal it and stop it wherever we can.
To my way of thinking, the best way for us to mourn the victims of gun violence
is to mobilize the faith community for gun control legislation.

Let me be very clear that I don't want to take away someone's hunting rifle,
although I don't understand the opposition to licensing and registering *any* firearm.
But we can no longer justify a society that allows
concealed handguns in schools and on the streets
or that allows people other than military and police to buy assault weapons
or that lets people get around existing gun laws
by selling weapons to people without background checks at gun shows.
As Christians we are called to act not for ourselves alone but for the whole people of God.
We are charged with healing the wounded, protecting the vulnerable, standing for peace.
The cross is the sign and the seal of that obligation.
And we know both from faith and experience that the cross is mightier than the gun.
The gun lobby is no match for the cross lobby.

On this Third Sunday after the Epiphany,
we walk in the light of the one who came to show
what it means to live fully as God's people in the world.
The kingdom is here, my friends, is now, and God's promises have been fulfilled.
But the kingdom is also unfinished and not yet, and there is work for us to do.
So let us use all of the gifts of the Body of Christ to do his work in his world,
that what we do may reflect God's reign, God's priorities, not those of humankind.
And let us do so not as isolated individuals, not on our own strength,
not with our own wisdom, but as those whom Christ has bound into one Body
to manifest his love for *all* in our time and place.

And let us pray for all those who die daily as the result of gun violence in America.
Let us pray for surviving family members and the pain they continue to endure.
Let us pray for the shooters and the miasma of sickness and pain they suffer.
Let us pray for the mentally ill and their families,
that we may help those families more effectively cope with their sickest members.
And let us pray for ourselves, that we may have faithful courage to act,
to persevere in resisting evil and to strive for justice and peace among all people,
that all God's children may live lives of wholeness and blessing and peace.
Amen.