

God Has No Favorites

We live in a world with so much pain, so much violence, so much that is just awful. That's true all the time, but sometimes it just feels especially true.

This is not the sermon I was planning to preach today. I had planned to continue our series on vulnerability and I was going to talk about insecurity. There's a tension for preachers to figure out when it's time to scrap the sermon that was planned because of what's happening in the world. We don't want to simply preach the news cycle, but there are times, when what is happening in the world just brings us to our knees so much so that we have to try our best to say something.

But it's not just saying something. In fact, I would argue that saying something can often be part of the problem. This week, colleges and universities throughout Boston have been embroiled in controversy because they said something...or didn't say something. Social justice organizations in hastily released statements said things that were incredibly harmful. In a world of social media where all of us can have a platform to say something, I wonder if we live in a world where it's tempting to say something too quickly...without having all the information, without considering who might be hurt, without stopping to consider another point of view. Saying something about what's happening in the world is risky.

But there are times when it has to be done. Specifically, today, I hope to say something about what is going on in the world in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Or to say it another way, "In a week that is filled with so much pain and so much violence and so much that is just awful, does the gospel of Jesus Christ have anything to say to us, anything to say to the world for such a moment?"

I believe it does. I believe it must. If our faith has anything to offer the world, then it must have a word to offer the world when it feels like the world is falling apart.

But we need to do this with great humility. Most of us here are not Jewish or Palestinian. Most of us have no idea what it's like to live in a world where people wish that I, and my people did not exist. Most of us have no idea what it's like to live in a world where a bomb could rip through our home at any moment. Most of us have no idea what it's like to live in a world where the police dehumanize us, where our homes might be taken from us. In short, most of us here have no idea what it's like to live as an Israeli or as a Palestinian, as a Jew or as a Muslim.

So all that we say today must be done remembering that we are in some ways removed from the pain that the Israelis and Palestinians are experiencing. And yet, as Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." We dare to speak a word today because of our common humanity, because we believe we are all connected, because we believe we are all God's children.

And the word of the gospel should always begin with one bedrock principle – God is love.

God is love.

This principle – that God is love – in a vacuum sounds like I’m stating the obvious. When all is right with the world, when people are living in peace, when the world is not in crisis, to say God is love is easy. But for our theology to mean something, what we claim about God must be able to stand up not only when it’s easy to say those things but especially when it’s hard.

Today, that means we claim that God loves every single person in Israel. And God loves every single person in Gaza. God loves every single person who was killed – whether by Hamas terrorists paragliding into Israel or by Israeli bombs dropped on Gaza City . God loves every single person who is being held hostage. God loves every single person who is without food, without clean drinking water, without any hope. And as hard as it is to say, God loves every single person who committed unspeakable evil acts against others.

God loves every Jew. And God loves every Palestinian. God loves all. Full stop. Period.

And precisely because God loves us so much, God weeps whenever anyone suffers. God weeps when people going to a musical festival were brutally attacked. God weeps when old women in wheelchairs and babies and teenagers were taken hostage. God weeps when they were executed in cold blood. God weeps when rockets tore through people’s apartments. God weeps for the people of Israel.

And God weeps for the 2 million people who live in Gaza, with half of them being children, who live in conditions described as the world’s largest open air prison. God weeps as the Gaza strip is being bombed into near oblivion. God weeps for the more than 700 kids who are estimated to have been killed so far. God weeps for every person who can’t find clean water to drink or food to eat. God weeps for the people of Palestine.

What is so radical about the gospel of Jesus Christ is actually a concept that is really so simple – God has no favorites. It’s the lesson Peter learned in our reading today. The great struggle of the early church was over the question, “Who is God’s favorite?” And in this passage, God sends a clear and resounding message to Peter, “God has no favorites.” Hear the words Peter himself uttered, “I now realize that God shows no partiality.” Hear the words Peter heard in his dream, “Don’t call profane that which God has made clean.”

Friends, what made the early church so radical was that very realization – God shows no partiality. God has no favorites. God weeps for all who suffer precisely because God loves all of us the same, all of us unconditionally, all of us with all the love in the universe. God has no favorites.

But that is so different than the world we live in, a world where there is so much pressure to define who is us and who is them, a world where we are told we have to pick sides.

That's really what all the controversy has been about this week. There have been those who tried to claim that the Hamas terrorists were nothing more than freedom fighters trying to overthrow the colonial oppressor and are justified in whatever means they use. And in doing so, they were attempting to justify the unjustifiable – the murder of civilians, the mutilation of children, the suffering of people who were just trying to live their lives.

And then you had those who would argue that any who tried to point out that Palestinian civilians have also suffered for far too long as anti-Semitic. These are people who are not free to go and come, people who have had their homes taken from them, people who don't have access, or rather denied access, to the basic necessities of life.

Friends, I believe we have to reject the dualism and simple explanations that so many are jumping too. The good vs bad, the us vs them. And instead, to remember that it is not only possible, but necessary to unequivocally denounce terrorism in all its forms, to strongly condemn Hamas, to assert the right of Israel to exist as a state while also uplifting the suffering of the Palestinian people.

And it's also possible and necessary to critique the Israeli government who, with the support of our tax dollars, has forced the Palestinians to live as second class citizens, who have bulldozed their homes, who have denied them the things that make for life, while also naming how difficult it must be to live in a land where many of the nations around you try to deny your right to exist.

You see, when we think we live in an us and them world, then it's easy to think everything the "Us" side does is good and everything the "them" side does is bad. But God calls us to learn to see the world and all in it only through the "us" lens.

While I don't have any answers as to how to stop this war, I do know that as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to be people of peace. We cannot generalize entire groups of people based upon some who do terrible things. We must compassionately empathize with all those who suffer and to demonstrate as best we can the love of Christ to ALL people. Just as God declares that all people are worthy of love, all people are worthy of peace, all people are worthy of justice, we too must let that belief – that none of us are any more or any less deserving than anyone else – be our resounding call in this moment.

But there's another reason why I think we must resist the "us" vs "them" dichotomy. When we spend all our energy picking sides, arguing about who the good guys and who the bad guys are, then I worry we will hear the shouts of those screaming so loudly that they are right to the point that we will not be able to hear the cries of those who suffer. Friends, this conflict is so complex. In some ways, it is hundreds if not thousands of years in the making. Anyone who promises an easy solution to this war is either incredibly naïve or downright lying. I am not preaching this sermon because I think I have an answer. Rather, I am preaching this sermon to remind us of what I think is the most important role we can play – to hear the cries of all who suffer and to

validate and honor and even grieve the pain that all impacted carry, regardless of what religion they practice or where they live or what their ethnicity may be.

So friends, let us hold space for people's pain and fear. Let us do all we can not to add to the mounting rhetoric that seeks to divide the Israelis and Palestinians into categories of good and bad. Instead, let us work for justice and liberation for ALL. Let us stand with our neighbors who are Jewish and let us stand with our neighbors who are Muslim. May we hold fast to the hope that God shows no partiality, that God has no favorites, that God carries the pain of everyone, and that God loves all unconditionally with every fiber of God's being.

Friends, that hope is the very essence of our faith as followers of Jesus. So let us remember the words of the angel in Peter's dream. "Don't call anything profane that God has named clean." Let's hear the words of Peter's great revelation, "I now know that God shows no partiality." And let's remember the faith that we have given our lives to. Let's remember the gospel of Jesus Christ that proclaims that each and every one of us is the Image of God, each and every one of us is created in love, by love, and for love.

Let's remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ cries out to us that all really does mean all. And when we can live into our identity as Image of God, as child of God, then we can confidently work for the liberation of all people, we can stand in solidarity with all who suffer, and we can trust that love, and love alone, will one day overcome all of the world's evil, all of the world's suffering, and all of the world's violence whether the news of the week is mundane and boring or whether the news of the week makes us feel that the world as we know it is coming to an end.

One way or another, love will overcome and our call is to trust in that...even and especially when it's so hard to do so.

Amen.