

Fr. Bailey Norman  
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The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Today might be a little longer than the usual sermon I preach. So you might want to go ahead now and get on your Yelp app and push your lunch reservation up about 15 minutes or so. I don't want you feeling any additional anxiety while you are listening to me!

Yes, I said additional anxiety because there are a lot of things going on in the world as we speak, a lot of things happening in our country as we speak that could cause me to stand up here for hours (to an empty sanctuary, mind you). But the purpose of the sermon each week – and the purpose of our being here each week – is so that we can learn to better live the Gospel, be the Gospel, and proclaim the Gospel each time we gather. This is even more important today because it seems that there are many competitors to that Gospel reaching out their hands for a bite of us, ultimately seeking to take us completely down a dead-end path that might initially pass for good ideology (to some at least) but ultimately leads away from the life-transforming power of the message we abide in here at this place.

There is a prominent evangelist named Dr. Tony Campolo who has been in active ministry for over 50 years. Dr. Campolo still travels to churches, universities, retreats, and offers his particular perspective on the Gospel that often focuses on social justice issues. He is well-known for a “stock” sermon that begins something like this:

“First thing I have to say, while you were sleeping, 30,000 children across the world died last night from malnutrition, disease, and violence. Second thing, you probably don't give a shit. Third thing, most of you are probably more angry that I said shit than you are over the fact that these children died.”

It is a rather harsh statement, one made even more harsh if I said the actual word (Because there are children, including mine, who are here, I'd rather them not ascertain the point of today's sermon being that Fr. Bailey said a bad word or that my 2 year old comes home repeating that word over and over again!). But the point is strikingly effective. We tend to place a much more substantial amount of

“outrage” over things that directly affect us than we do on those things that, while in theory are sad, don’t necessarily guide (at least to our knowledge) the decisions or experiences we face each and every day. But forget actions for a moment – focus on the words! While I certainly believe that cursing and swearing and taking the Lord’s Name in vain is not something faithful followers of Jesus should be doing (and I have my own struggle with that at times), how much time and energy does American Christianity – even and especially the Episcopal Church – spend on addressing sinful behavior that is more aesthetic and individual in nature versus those things which affect the lives of countless souls all around the world AND are at the heart of the power of Sin (capital “S”) that Paul spends so much time talking about in his letter to the Romans. Our mouths are often **way too** silent on these matters. While we do speak **about** them in our church, often (though certainly not always) our words tend to focus on how these problems affect **US** rather than those who might be bearing the full weight of things such as racism, poverty, and violence abroad. In fact, many of the things that have been said lately about the events in Charlottesville are things which not only fail to address some of the underlying issues but instead point to the very different understanding of the Gospel than the one we are here to proclaim today. More on that in just a moment.

Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew’s text in no uncertain terms that the unclean state (of which he is accused by the Pharisees of failing to address by not asking his disciples to wash their hands before a meal) of human beings before God is in large part based on what comes out of one’s mouth, not on what goes in. “Evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” – wow, that’s a big burden to cast on us, to say that our big mouths can lead to all these things! Of course the mouth is really just a vehicle from which the heart reveals its true nature and character. Our mouth can and does manipulate, tease, accuse, intimidate, condemn, and outright lie to procure whatever the human heart truly desires. But the mouth does not simply lead astray by promoting one’s own agenda. With good intentions (and you know the saying about that), our mouths often proclaim our own unique perspective as the GOSPEL truth (pun intended), which can lead to a distortion of God’s universal purpose and intent (and thus the true Gospel) by deflecting, neglecting, or outright denying our own participation in the sinfulness that still binds us and shackles us as the people of God today.

What do I mean by this? I have heard so many people in the wake of Charlottesville, speaking about the crowds of neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other clearly non-defendable positions, saying, “Yes, Nazis are bad, BUT they were only there exercising their right to free speech” or “Yes, the violence they did was bad, BUT they were also only defending themselves from those attacking them from the other side.” I want to be clear that I don’t want to wade into a debate over Confederate monuments or partisan politics of any sort today. I want to be crystal clear that my point is calling out the fact that people of these wicked ideologies – many of whom claim CHRISTIAN belief – are being legitimized and even encouraged precisely because they are not being called out unequivocally by all who proclaim the true Gospel of Christ. The words that need to be said in response to the beliefs and actions of these hate groups should **NOT BE SPOKEN FOR THE SAKE OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS** (i.e., it makes us look like we are on the “right” side of history, whatever that means), **BUT FOR THE SAKE OF CHALLENGING AN ALTERNATIVE GOSPEL THAT IS PATENTLY FALSE AND DANGEROUS**. One of my friends and a colleague in ordained ministry, The Rev. Dr. Esau McCaulley (who happens to be one of the relatively few African-American clergy in the Episcopal/Anglican church, which makes it very important to hear his perspective) wrote very eloquently in a recent blog post that the duty Christians have in the aftermath of Charlottesville and any other event in which parties stand with an ideology that immediately denies human dignity to anyone is to definitively proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ firmly and strongly above anything else (especially these sinister ones) that seek to make a claim upon the heart and soul of any of God’s children, **ESPECIALLY** those whose race or culture immediately puts them in the crosshairs of discrimination and dehumanization.

When our mouths utter the words “**Yes, but**” in the face of such evil ideology (even when, yes, a number of those on the “other side” acted out in violence), we have fallen into the trap that Dr. Campolo laid for us. Yes, the ideology of some of the counter-protesters is full of hatred and violence as well. But if we jump immediately to them (the ones that bother us) before we’ve even begun to discern the position of those who truly bear the weight of the KKK coming to town, then we have swept aside the experience of living as a black person in this country, the experience of those whose color or ethnicity immediately makes them a target far too often, all for the sake of defending our perspective on the matter. We have put what offends us above the call of the Gospel – a Gospel which tells us how broken we all are, and one that says God binds us all through

Jesus Christ into a new people of many races, cultures, and nations. We have just proven ourselves very capable of distorting the justice and mercy of God – just as the Israelites of the Old Testament and the religious leaders of Jesus’ time were accused of doing – by grossly misplacing our necessary outrage from where it truly needs to be.

I am reading a book right now called The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ by the Rev. Fleming Rutledge, an Episcopal priest. You might think the title speaks to something that is obvious to all of us – after all, the crucifixion is kind of an important part of our faith! But what her marvelous book illustrates to me is that modern-day Christianity has forgotten or even misconstrued the meaning of the crucifixion in our day-to-day lives. One of those places she calls us to task on is in understanding what it truly means when Jesus says in Matthew 10 that those who will not take up their cross and follow him are not worthy of him (more accurately, “cannot be my disciple” (Matt 10:38). She follows this up by saying that one of the most central components of being a Christian in this regard is trying to understand someone else’s predicament. To pronounce outrage for something that offends us is one thing; to do it on behalf of another, especially one who does not possess the voice or the standing to speak for themselves, is very much a Christian position. After all, the image of the cross itself is such an outrage that throughout Scripture it was regarded (according to Paul in particular) as a scandal, one that offended the sensibilities of both Jew and Gentile. The marred face and body of Jesus was an aesthetically unpleasing sight; the death he suffered was that of a criminal; and he was one who was cast out because he was the only one who could call out the power Sin has over all of humanity. And he was the only one who could break that power, the one that twists and distorts good into evil and evil into good.

And yet the cross calls us to look and see – look and see what we did. Tomorrow many of you will be looking at the solar eclipse, and I’m sure you are taking the proper precautions! We are told (as if this were some recently discovered insight) that looking into the sun is harmful to our eyes because it might burn a hole in our retinas. Staring at the cross is something that leaves no doubt that Sin has burned a hole into our very hearts and souls. In making us painfully aware of this gaping wound inside us, the cross tells us in no uncertain terms that we too are responsible for Jesus’ fate. As CS Lewis says, “Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his

arms.” But, as Rutledge is very quick to point out, the power of the cross, in convicting us of our slavery under Sin, also convicts us of the powerful reality that grace has already taken hold of us. Gazing intently at the cross reminds us of God’s love for us which existed beyond and before we fell into sinfulness, like the distant but vivid picture of the first memory we have of one of our parents playing with us, holding our hand, or hugging us. The cross speaks of our separation from this reality, yet it gives us the means by which we can make this joy complete not only in ourselves but in the whole of creation. Thus the Resurrection, intimately tied to the cross as a singular event, gives us the hope of seeing this joy complete for all and in all. It proclaims that, truly, all of the nations shall stream out of darkness into the everlasting light of the Father who rules from the glory of Zion.

So what are we called to do? What can we do? **Proclaim the Gospel, the true and authentic Gospel.** Do not compromise it in any way, knowing full well the temptations to acquiesce or dismiss too easily those things which seek to shove this Gospel aside from its place of utmost importance. It is true that there is blame on all sides – when you look at it from the perspective of the cross. It is wrong for police to be hunted down and executed. It is wrong to brand any person as subhuman because of something that “their kind” has said and done. These are things that personally offend me because of my personal connections to police and people from other “outcast” groups that I see persecuted on a regular basis. But from the perspective of the cross, we are also especially called to hold accountable those positions that, even if we are not directly involved, are part of the legacy of our culture. What are our children hearing from us, or, even more appropriate for today, not hearing? Because they are listening. And make no mistake – these other ideologies are gunning for the hearts and souls of our children. Hate is such an easy thing to do because it simplifies things. You have those who are good or evil; you have those who are in or out. It’s neat and tidy – to the exclusion of those who are swept away. Our children need to learn, and we all gather here weekly to be renewed in this, that the Gospel convicts us all of our tendency to wander. But with this comes the immense privilege to know that all people are created in the image of God. We share the same burdens, but we share the same calling as well. All people who come to believe in the redeeming power of God’s love have a unique place in the body of Christ.

**So proclaim the Gospel.** Speak not in hatred but in outrage to those who seek to twist the very words and being of God into something else. Take time to listen

and discern the experiences of those who walk in a different world than you and I do. Speak in conviction grounded in the humility of the cross and the discovery/refresher of the power of the joy found in the knowledge and love of the Lord. Claim our responsibility. If our child runs amok in a store or restaurant, even though the parents may not be DIRECTLY at fault, who bears the burden for calling out the behavior of that child? So too, our parish (while not exclusively) is primarily a group of white, middle-class Americans, like the great majority of Episcopal churches. If Muslims are criticized for not calling out their fellow Muslims who engage in terrorism, and if African-Americans are criticized for violence done in the name of Black Lives Matter, what makes us think we are any less responsible for calling out those of our own race or culture who directly or indirectly promote violence and hatred toward others? **PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL.** May the words of our mouths and the mediations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, to glorify you, to defend one another, and to proclaim humility and righteousness together before you and all of God's people.