

“For the Glory of God”

Sermon, Rev. Brian R. Louis

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In Luke’s account of the arrest of Jesus, he writes that a follower of Christ asked if they should fight those who were going to arrest Jesus with their swords. One of them didn’t wait for an answer and cut the ear off a servant of the high priest. Jesus wasn’t having any of it. He exclaimed, “No more of this!” and he touched the man’s ear and healed him (Luke 22:49-51). In the arrest scene account in the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus speaks those famous words to the unnamed follower, “Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52).

This was not the sermon I planned to give today, but the events of yesterday’s shooting at former President Trump’s rally in Pennsylvania seemed to demand it. He was fortunate and only had minor injuries and was released from the hospital last night. Others were not so fortunate. One person attending the speech was killed and two others were seriously wounded. The shooter was killed. This act of violence shattered the lives of so many people in a matter of seconds. I pray for healing for all who were affected by the shooting yesterday.

Violence happens everywhere, even here in little Sierra Vista. Last month 53-year-old William McCutchan was murdered in what police believe was a road rage incident. Gun violence and violence in general have affected people here in our congregation and their friends and families.

Any loss of life is tragic and sad at the hand of violence. Our country has a long and sordid history with violence, political murder and assassination attempts, and mass murder. We do. That is a fact. In 2023, an average of 118 people died each day from a gun related incident, according to the National Institute for Health Care Management. More than 43,000 people died last year in a gun related incident. In 2021, 54% of all gun deaths were by suicide, according to the Centers for Disease

Control. 43% were murders. We are and have been a sick country for a long time. These are all grim realities.

We are human and at times we all want to lash out in anger and despair when something happens to us or people we love. Or we can see what is going on in our country and give in to anger and despair. But do not sink into despair. For despair leads to the rotting of the soul. There is a time to grieve, and be angry, to be resentful even. But the danger is staying there. When we stay somewhere in that morass, that is where the greatest danger lies. It is there where the soul rots and decays. It is there where we may never recover from the soul sickness, and we may be lost to despair forever. I refuse by the help of God to be lost to despair. If I lose myself to despair, how can I be a good minister? I can't. I refuse to be lost to despair. My job, our job, is to live for the glory of God.

We in the Reformed tradition believe in the authority of scripture. Scripture guides our lives. In times like this, and every other time for that matter, it's important for us to think about what Jesus and the New Testament say about violence and retribution. If God is first in our lives this is where our attention should go. As I digested all this yesterday and today, that is what I thought. What do the gospels and New Testament say about violence, resentment, and hatred? What does the Son of God and Scripture have to say about violence? Well, I've given one example already from Jesus at the start of the sermon from Matthew. But there is more.

In Matthew, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9).

In Romans chapter 12, Paul writes, ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God,^[c] for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ Instead, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

In our New Testament reading this morning, Paul says in verses 4 and 5, “Jesus Christ ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” According to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever.” Praise God. That is a doxology, a hymn or words of praise for God.

Don’t tell me about the sad state of the nation. Yes, it’s sad. What are you doing about it? Are you praying for peace? An end to gun violence? Are you writing your legislators telling them to do something and pass some laws to help stem the tide of violence? Are you making sure you’re kind to everyone you encounter, even the people who support political candidates you don’t? What are you doing for the glory of God? That’s where it all starts. Let’s look at ourselves first to see where are we praising God? Are we living and doing the work of God, to whom be the glory forever and ever?

I want my life to be for the glory of God. For in that life, that is a life worth living. That is something to be proud of. A life of resentment, complaining, blaming, raging, that is not a life worth living. That is not the life that Jesus commands of us. The words of Jesus earlier in this sermon are what he wants from us. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

Don’t give in to the despair and the despondency. Think about what the people in Jesus’ time were going through. They were occupied by a foreign power who cared little for the land or the

people. Judea and Galilee, were distant outposts from Rome, and not plum assignments for the soldiers in the Roman army or the officials there. They surely had reasons to give in to despair and despondency. Look at your lives. All your creature comforts. All the freedoms you enjoy. It's a far cry to the first century Jews in Galilee and Judea.

Being a Christian is not easy. The scripture passages I read in this sermon are not easy to live. But that is the gospel. That is our scripture. That is the gospel. That is the Christian message. If you want something different than that, if you want someone to tell you that all your anger is good, or that your resentment and rage are justified and should be fed, well, I'm not the preacher for you and frankly, you're in the wrong place. If you want the gospel and the command from Jesus to love one another, then you're in the right place. If you want the message from Paul to live for the glory of God, you're in the right place. Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's motto is *solī Deo gloria*. Glory to god alone. I pray that all I do be *solī Deo gloria*. For you god, glory to you alone.

Living my life for the glory of God. That is something one can go to the Lord on judgment day and say, I lived by your standards as best I could. I tried to live for the glory of God. to God, be the glory forever and ever.

We're Christians. This is the deal right here. It isn't an eye for an eye. Jesus didn't preach an eye for an eye. We are all commanded to live for the glory of God. Violence is not for the glory of God. Be radical. Don't give in to the despair. Love your enemies. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God. Turn despair into hope. Amen.

We are all called to live for the glory of God.

We can't make people live for the glory of God. But we can. We can start right here, right now. Faith Presbyterian is not a church of despair. It is not a church of anger and resentment. If you want to swim in that, I would suggest you go somewhere else.

to whom be glory forever and ever