

“Answering the Call”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 2



First reading

Matthew 10:16

from the *J.B. Phillips New Testament*

(Jesus said to the twelve,) “Here I am sending you out like sheep with wolves all round you; so be as wise as serpents and yet as harmless as doves.”

Second reading

from *Strength to Love*

by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jesus recognized the need for the blending of opposites. He knew that his disciples were going out to take his message into a difficult and hostile world. He realized that they would confront the recalcitrance of political officials, and the intransigence of the protectors of the old order. He knew that they would confront cold and arrogant men whose hearts had been hardened by the long winter of traditionalism. So, He said to them: "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves." Then he goes on to give them a formula for action: "be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" In other words, Jesus is saying that individual life at its best requires the possession of a tough mind and a tender heart.

As we all know, there are politically charged and morally repugnant messages swirling around us in the name of Christianity, and it's always nice to know that there is more than one lens with which to view the life and teachings of Jesus. One of those teachings comes to us today from an episode in Matthew's gospel where he was sending a number of his friends and followers out into the towns and countrysides to teach and comfort and heal—basically to spread the work and the message he had been sharing with them. Not everyone would be ready to receive them or their message, so part of their preparation was to answer the question, “What do you do when people don't want to hear what you have to say?” And maybe even more importantly, “What do you do when they become hostile in their response?” This was Jesus's very wise and perhaps timeless answer: “*Here I am sending you out like sheep with wolves all round you; so be as wise as serpents and yet harmless as doves.*” The simplicity of this statement makes it wise, and its wisdom makes it timeless.

One can imagine a post-modern Jesus saying, “Here I am sending you into the far reaches of the internet, with haters and trolls and bots all around you, so be wise like serpents in your engagements and harmless like doves in your intent.” Most everyone I talk to, at least those who engage in social media, are often left with a sense of regret about their presence there. “I wish I hadn’t posted that,” or “I can’t believe the pushback I got,” or sometimes even, “I’m not sure social media is the place for me at all.” Maybe it isn’t, or maybe it is. That is a question that only you can answer for yourself, but the point is, if you’re going to engage the world in conversation—the conversation that we’ve never needed more—you’re going to need to pay attention to how you do the work of getting people to hear you.

The disciples were encouraged to enter a village and offer what they had. If people received them and their message, that would be great. Where they encountered rejection, Jesus encouraged them to shake the dust off their feet and move on. This is a time to step up and step forward, and in some cases to drop everything and take to the street corners with our signs and voices. But the work of peace and justice will eventually require us to be judicious with our energies and careful in our approach, and for good reason. Jesus looked at his band of followers and understood that they were inexperienced and limited in their resources. Enthusiasm could lead them to do the right things in the wrong ways, so they needed to get it right.

This is one of those moments in human history where we need to get it right because major events are happening rapidly, and we might want to conserve our strength in this marathon, when it might feel better to us to jump ahead in a passionate sprint. In this information-saturated life of ours, hardly a week goes by without a cataclysm. Stories of events like the school shootings at Sandy Hook capture us and won’t let us go. We always think this will be the time when everything will change, until it doesn’t, and we find ourselves living in frustration until the next inexplicable act arrives.

It was four years ago on Thursday that the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando became the scene of another mass shooting. And still it continues with specific acts of racially motivated injustice and violence that have taken center stage lately, as they should, calling masses of people into the streets all over the world. But as we approach another week since the murder of George Floyd, the question may arise, “But what do we do now? How do we preserve the momentum that has been established? How do we keep ourselves from the next outbreak of complacency?”

This was a question that was always on the mind of Martin Luther King, and he saw in these words of Jesus a formula for action. It became a prominent theme in his 1963 book entitled *Strength to Love*, a publication that his widow said was the one he was most proud of. “Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” Dr. King thought Jesus was saying that in order to be effective we should “possess a tough mind and a tender heart.” It was a blending of these opposite qualities into the balance of the human soul in which he saw the most potential for lasting change. Let’s not be mistaken, though. There are times that require more “serpent” and less “dove,” like right now when the rallying cry is simply, “Enough, already!” Threats of injustice should always be resisted, but when those threats are racially motivated, the lines must be drawn ever more clearly.

Our community is based in one of the most politically liberal and progressive areas of the country, and yet it remains one of the most racially segregated. But no matter where you live, whatever the makeup of your community—racially, politically, and economically—there is one thing that is true EVERYWHERE: we have hard work to do, and in case we’ve forgotten, it will call to us over and over and over again.

One of the gifts of having lived a little longer on this planet is the ability to see the patterns that get established, for good and for ill. The cycles of history are so often repeated, and each time they are, we have yet another opportunity to go a little deeper and perhaps rise a little higher than we have before.

I’ve been paying a lot of attention lately to the messages shared by members of the clergy during the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century. A century before that, it wasn’t a civil rights movement, but a civil war that was fought over many of the same questions with which we struggle now. When I was a child, my grandmother told me many stories about her grandfather, a lawyer in the mid-nineteenth century who for a time set aside the pacifism of his Quaker heritage and fought in the Union Army, because his pacifism was superseded by his conviction that no human being should own another. The violence of that war haunted him for the rest of his life, but that didn’t stop him from being nearly the first in line when Lincoln called for troops. It was a call that he answered. And it inspires me in the twenty-first century to respond to my own call. It may not be a call to fight on a battlefield, but it is indeed a call to let my voice and my conviction be heard.

It’s not going to be easy, but the cause of peace and justice demands that we act. As Dr. King so aptly put it “a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” As often as the call is issued, we must keep answering it. Wise as serpents. Harmless as doves. This is a plan of action that our times and our descendants deserve.

