

November 18, 2007
Isaiah 12, Luke 21:5-19
Dr. Lewis F. Galloway

“A Time to Speak”

Once, I gathered with a family to plan the funeral service for a man who had lived a long, colorful and good life. In the living room, generations of the family began to tell stories about their father and grandfather. They talked about his character, his gifts and his quirks. Then, one of them told how he did not often talk about his faith, but he always gave the blessing at Thanksgiving. It was such an important moment to him that he wanted to be prepared. In the days before Thanksgiving he would take a yellow legal pad and begin to write down all the things in the past year for which he was thankful. When the family gathered around the table laden with food, he would begin to pray and pray and pray. The irresistible aroma of home-cooked food was more than the crowd could take. As he prayed, the father would sniffle, shed a few tears and continue praying. When he finally paused to draw breath, ever yone burst forth with loud “amens” and dove into the food. On the day we planned his service, this Thanksgiving memory brought smiles and tears to his family.

Thanksgiving for him was a time to speak. His prayers were like the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations!” In those Thanksgiving prayers, he drew spiritual water from the wells of salvation. He bore witness to the truth that the Lord God was his strength and salvation.

The disciples were walking with Jesus in the Temple compound. They were admiring the magnificent architecture, the beautiful stones, the work of the artisans and the displays of precious offerings. Those fine ornaments, weighty buildings and mysterious spaces bore testimony to the goodness, majesty and power of God. These things spoke of the traditions of their faith. The Temple was built to last forever. The Temple stood as a sign of God’s blessing. Surely, God would never again abandon the Temple, the city or the pe ople. As long as the Temple stood in Jerusalem, they could repeat like a man- tra the Robert Browning line, “God’s in his heaven - All’s right with the world.”

Yet, all was not right with the world. It was not a time of peace, but it was a time to speak. The words of Jesus disrupted the comfortable moment. Intense conflict was on the horizon. Jesus said that the days would come “when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” Jesus told the people about the things that were going to happen in their own lifetime and in the generations to come. They had a hard time understanding and accepting what Jesus said.

By the end of the week Jesus would be dead. In a few short years, the disciples would be rejected by their own brothers and sisters in the Jewish community and persecuted by the authorities. Within thirty years, the Roman war against the Jews would break out. In the year 70 A.D., the Temple would be destroyed. Jesus also spoke of other natural disasters, wars, suffering and tribulation that were yet to be. It was not a time of peace, but it was a time to speak. Jesus was preparing the disciples to live faithfully in the suffering and conflicts they faced. It was a time to speak.

As long as the church exists in the world, there will be discord and strife. No matter what happens to us in this life, our lives are safe in God. As the prophet Isaiah said, “God is our salvation!” Just as God stands at the beginning of our lives, so God stands at life’s end. Jesus is the Lord of history. No terrorist, no recession, no political movement and no war can defeat the plans of God. When the tragedies of our lives and the brutal realities of history challenge our faith, we are called to witness. It is not a time of peace, but it is a time to speak.

These times of trouble are the moments in which the church makes its boldest witness. When our society seems most fragmented and when our world seems full of conflict, God sends the Holy Spirit to encourage our faith and give us the word to speak. We do not have to rely on our own wisdom or strength. Jesus wants us to rely on his Spirit, who is with us in our difficulties. The times in which we live call for the patient endurance of God’s people. The times call for trust in God. The boldest witness we can make is to refuse to give into the pervasive fear and despair of our society. The boldest witness we can make is to refuse to give into the hatred, the thirst for revenge and the acceptance of hunger, poverty, vio-

lence and war. As God's people, we live in courage and hope. We go about our daily tasks trusting that God will provide for our needs.

Only when we know that our lives are secure in God can we find the courage to speak the truth in love. When I hear the gospel message and I look at our lives and the world around us, I try to discern the word that the Spirit is giving the church to speak. The word that comes to me again and again is peace – peace within us, peace among us and peace around the world. This is the word and the wisdom that the Spirit gives to the church to speak. No one can withstand it or contradict it.

We are all torn up inside ourselves and we cannot be at peace until we know the peace of God that takes away our sin, our fear and our anger. As Isaiah says, "God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might." There is someone you know whose life is bound up and needs to hear this word of peace. You may be the very one that God has put into that person's life to speak the word of truth. You wonder if the time is right, if they will be able to hear you or if they will believe you. You don't think you know what to say. If you truly love that person, as you have come to know the love of Jesus, then the Spirit will lead you into what to say. It may not even be a word spoken with your lips, but something you do to awaken someone else to the peace that comes only from God. It is a time to speak.

Only God can break down the barriers that separate us from one another in our families, our church and our community. We have difficulty listening to people whose spiritual, social and political ideas are different from our own. So we disparage them or make fun of them, rather than trying to understand them and appreciate them. The truth of God is always bigger than my understanding of it. God speaks through others to help me understand more and more of the truth. In our divided community, there is a role for the church to host forums where we can listen to people from all sides of difficult questions such as immigration, war and peace, interfaith dialogue, health care, violence, public education and ecology. If we in the church, who bear within ourselves the Spirit of the living God, cannot model a capacity to embrace differences through love, then we have very little to offer to help a fragmented community come to know the peace of God.

Twenty-three years ago, thirteen year old Ryan White was diagnosed with AIDS. When he learned about his illness, he wanted to live as normal a life as possible. He and his family fought for his right to attend school in Florida. The fear, anger and ignorance of the community were difficult to overcome. Eventually, he and his family moved to Cicero, Indiana, where he was welcomed into the local high school. Ryan White did not give into the fear, the scorn or the rejection. He spoke about his illness and he called the nation to show compassion to those with AIDS, no matter how they contracted the disease. He weathered the storms through the peace of God. He stood before the rulers and the authorities. He was bound by his disease; his soul was free. The Spirit gave him the word of peace, understanding and reconciliation to speak. He died on Palm Sunday, 1990. As you know, his funeral was held in this sanctuary.

It is a time to speak. It is time for men and women of faith to speak about a larger vision of what God intends for creation. The thirst for revenge and the desire to control do not bring peace. Neither terrorism nor oppression brings peace. Lasting peace will come only through forgiveness and reconciliation. People may laugh at the peacemakers, but God calls them blessed. I would rather be a fool for Christ, than wise in the ways of the world. It is time for the church to rise up and take a stand against the hunger of children and the scourge of AIDS in southern Africa. It is time for us as Christians to talk about sharing our resources rather than wasting our resources. It is time to speak a word of peace. We stand before rulers and those in authority. Fear leads us to retreat into our small thoughts and personal desires, but faith leads us to a bold witness that none can withstand or contradict.

In August of 1991, eight workers from the international Christian organization Shelter Now were arrested in Afghanistan by the Taliban and kept in prison for preaching Christianity. Among those arrested were two Americans. These eight workers were rescued during the war. Americans Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry said that even though they were treated with kindness by their captors, they did not know what would happen to them. They watched the Taliban beat other Afghan prisoners, both women and men. As the bombs from American airplanes exploded overhead, they wondered if the next one would hit them. Mercer said, "there were days of despair, not knowing we would ever get out....All I could do is

cry out to God to come and help me.”

After their release, they could have rejected their faith, left their mission, given into bitterness and sought revenge. Instead, the Holy Spirit gave them the right word to speak. Heather Mercer spoke gratefully of the kindness of her captors. After her imprisonment ended, Mercer said, “In our hearts, we are committed to the Afghan people. I can say for all eight of us, that we love Afghanistan.”

It is easier to give thanks when life is good and we gather with good friends and family around a Thanksgiving table laden with food and drink. It is easy to find the right word to speak. What do you do when it feels like the world is collapsing around you? What do you do when not one stone is left upon another and all those things that made life secure are gone? What do you do when there is an empty place at the table?

This is the moment we find the words and the wisdom the Spirit gives us to speak.