

Sermon: Always Reforming
Text: Colossians 1:1-14
Date: October 28, 2018
Context: WWPC
All Saints Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

“...may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to [God], who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.”

Colossians 1:11,12

To say this has been a frightening week, and a tragic week, feels like it does not do justice to the kind of week it's been.

If you'll permit me this very brief review, because I believe it's relevant to what you're feeling right now and where we are going this morning, on Tuesday, our president declared himself to be a “nationalist”.

He resisted the suggestion that this also meant he is a white nationalist. But to most observers this claim seemed disingenuous since that word has a well-established history.

People who are familiar with this word, this concept, and especially people who use it to describe themselves, take it for granted that “nationalist” implies “white”.

Historically it has always carried with it clear racial inferences and unambiguous anti-Semitic overtones. And now our president was using it to describe himself.

That was Tuesday.

Early on Wednesday, members of the secret service intercepted bombs that had been sent through the mail to former President Barak Obama, to former Sec. of State Hillary Clinton and to George Soros, a wealthy Jewish philanthropist and well-known supporter of progressive causes.

Before all was said and done, thirteen bombs were sent to prominent members and nationally known supporters of one of the country's two major political parties.

Fortunately, and as I'm sure you know, all of the bombs were intercepted before they reached their intended targets and none of them exploded in the process.

Adding to the good news aspect of the story, the man who made and sent them was quickly identified by the FBI and arrested before he could make and send any more such devices.

That was Wednesday.

On Thursday, a white man with a well-known history of violence fatally shot two African-American customers at a Kroger grocery store in Jeffersontown, Kentucky, after he had tried to enter a predominately black church, presumably with the intent to harm whoever he might have found there.

Then yesterday this already horrible week was capped by yet another mass shooting, this time in a synagogue. It took the lives of eleven innocent Americans, eleven members of the Tree of Life Synagogue in Squirrel Hill, a predominately Jewish neighborhood in Pittsburgh.

Six other people were wounded in the shooting, including four police officers.

What all three of these latter incidents share in common is that they were perpetrated by violent men, yes, by deranged men, yes, but also men who freely describe themselves as white nationalists. And who confess to having been inspired by the president's apparent support for their cause.

So, if it suddenly feels to you like we are living in a national nightmare, you're not wrong, because we are.

And if that leaves you feeling frightened and disoriented, that is normal and understandable, because that's what nightmares do, only this one is real.

But fear and disorientation might not be the only thing you're feeling this morning. I would guess you're also feeling anger, perhaps even rage. And also deep sorrow for the loss of innocent life. And you may even be feeling a touch of despair. How long O Lord? How long must we continue to bear witness to these terrible, needless tragedies? How long?

If you are feeling any of these things, I have good news for you this morning. As in gospel level, Capital G, Capital N, level Good News.

And here it is: This nightmare will eventually come to an end.

But wait! There's still more Good News. Equipped with the transformational power of God's love, and filled with the irresistible force of the Holy Spirit, we're going to help end it.

But to get to that part of our story, I must first back up and start at the beginning.

Today is the third Sunday in this year's stewardship campaign, and our theme for today is Stewardship of our Inheritance.

We chose this theme because on the church calendar today is also Reformation Sunday.

So we wanted to look at the gifts passed down to us by the likes of Martin Luther and John Calvin.

We wanted to explore what those gifts might mean for us, and what they might look like in the church at this moment in history. And why they matter at this moment in history.

To help us do that, we chose this text from Colossians, as it speaks both to our overarching theme for this stewardship season, and our specific theme for today.

Here Paul celebrates the Good News that has come to the people of Colossae. He understands that the Gospel is a living word, a dynamic force that bears fruit among its hearers.

And he joyfully gives thanks to the [One], who causes this growth, the One who blessed the people of Colossae with this vibrant inheritance, coming down to them from the saints who have preceded them in the life of faith.

That is exactly the word we had hoped to bring today: themes of fruitfulness rooted and grounded in faith, themes of an inheritance that is rightly ours, an inheritance of abundance that is rooted and grounded in love and that is passed from generation to generation, all the way down to us here today.

Which all sounds wonderful except I realized that sometimes the inheritance we receive is not always positive, not always fruitful, not always Gospel.

This is true even when we are talking about the most direct descendants of the no less than the great reformer Martin Luther himself.

During the rise of national socialism in Germany in the 1930s, the Lutheran church raised virtually no alarms about the changes they were witnessing in German culture, no concerns about the alarming language being used by their leaders to describe their Jewish neighbors.

Which raises the question of why not?

Why did everyday church-goers in Munich and Wittenberg not speak out against and resist this grotesque ideology's blatant nationalism and its pernicious anti-Semitism?

Of course some brave Christians, some late-generation reformers, did speak out, Dietrich Bonhoeffer most famously among them. And it cost him.

Which is perhaps why so many did not speak out. But I'm sure that it's also true that plenty of reasonably devout Lutherans were quick to celebrate the rise of German nationalism.

They were perfectly happy to see their beloved Fatherland rising again from the ashes of World War I, even if the man leading that rise held views that were deeply antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps others didn't think it was their duty to speak out. In Germany, the Lutheran church is the state church --- Germans do not observe the separation of church and state in the way we do here.

So perhaps they attended worship on a Sunday content to believe that church was meant to serve the interests of the state, even as those interests began to threaten the safety of millions of their fellow Germans of Jewish heritage.

Now, it is much too big a jump to go from then to now. And we must resist the temptation to draw a straight line from the Berlin of 1939 to the Washington DC of 2018.

But it's not a leap to say our county is in peril. And it's fair to say that half the churches in this country have either cheered or remained silent as Muslims were banned from visiting here -- a whole class of people kept from coming here to get an education, or to visit their family, or to receive desperately needed medical care.

Half of the churches in America either cheered or remained silent as our brown skinned, Spanish speaking neighbors were rounded up by state security forces and sent packing, in many cases back to countries where they haven't lived in twenty or thirty years.

Half the churches in America could not find it in themselves to speak out even when children of refugees and asylum seekers arriving at our southern border were ripped away from their parents and locked in cages.

If you've ever wondered why I am so outspoken about the creeping authoritarianism we're all witnessing, that's why.

We've seen this exact pattern play out once before in history. We've seen what happens when the church is either complicit or silent in the face of overt acts of race-based hate and even violence -- and we're not going to make that mistake again.

We are not going to be silent in the face of such things. Believe me, I wish I could steer well clear of these waters.

I wish that was the kind of world we lived in. I wish we could gather here every Sunday and sing all of our favorite old hymns and that I could preach nice nourishing sermons about bread and fish and wayward lambs and lost coins.

But that is not the world we live in. Not right now anyway.

So we are going to raise our voice while we still can, while it is still safe to do so, and we are going to speak out against the grotesque policies coming out of our nation's capital, and we're going to speak out against and resist the hatred that has been unleashed by them.

And we're going to do this in part because of the great lesson the Reformation has taught us.

Last October marked the five hundredth anniversary of the moment when an Augustinian monk and theologian named Martin Luther nailed his famous Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

It was not Luther's intention to launch a global reformation. His defiant gesture was simply his way of saying, Enough! Something is wrong and I'm not willing to be silent about it any longer.

Of course Luther was himself not immune from serious criticism for his troubling views about his Jewish countrymen and women. It's also true that he paid dearly for speaking truth to the power of his day.

Still, this great reformer showed us that equipped only with a hammer and a nail, and a page worth of powerful ideas, it's possible to change the world.

But a hammer and a nail only work when you wield them. Something is wrong with our world, friends, and I am not willing to be silent about. And I strongly suspect you're not either.

Now, that said, I don't know what your particular tool set might look like. And even more to the point I also understand well that, whatever they are, you may not be ready to pick up them up and wield them at this moment.

We are still absorbing another terribly grievous loss, at the end of a horrifying and extremely violent week.

Maybe you need time to sit Shiva a little longer, perhaps the full seven days.

Or maybe before you do anything else, perhaps you need to find other ways to honor the innocent lives that were lost in these hate-based shootings this week.

One way to do that is to join the vigil that will be happening downtown later today.

Or maybe you just need to disappear into the mountains to spend some time hiking your favorite trails. Or you may need to queue up Barbara Streisand's greatest hits on your stereo at home and sing those gorgeous songs at the top of your lungs while you sob your heart out.

But when you're ready, grab whatever tools you prefer, whatever tools suit you best.

Maybe it's your voice: your praying or your singing. Or the phone calls you're going to make to your Senators calling on them to help stop this madness. Or the calls you're going to make to mobilize your neighbors and your friends to join you in taking a stand for what's good and right and true.

Maybe it's your vote -- and yes, I'm saying this from this pulpit -- because we are long past the point of choosing between left and right. The issue of right and wrong, moral and immoral is on the ballot all across the country this year, and as people of faith and conscience, we get to have a say in how that issue is decided.

Maybe it's just simple acts of kindness, to yourself or to others. Tuning out the news for as long as you need to get your peace of mind back. Spending an hour with your granddaughter, maybe taking her to deliver groceries to a minority family, showing her by your example that God's love is larger than human categories or race and class and religion.

I don't know what your tools might be. What I do know is that one man, one single man, equipped with a hammer and a nail and a list of ideas, changed the world.

I also know that we are not alone. We are not just one person. We are part of a great global church that was once reformed and is always reforming.

And we're part of a growing movement consisting of millions of other progressive-minded people like us who at work even as I speak to effect its next reformation.

I know that there are literally millions of other people out there just like us -- people of faith, people of conscience, people who care about the future -- and that every one of these people wields her or his own set of tools.

And because I know all of that, I also know and believe at the core of my being that together we can change the world.

We can end this nightmare in which we are currently living. And we can realize a bright hopeful future for ourselves, for our children, and for all the people who will come after us.

Because we are the church of Jesus Christ, once reformed and always reforming.