

I think many preachers may have lost sleep this week trying to figure out what to say this Sunday. One of the most common things we hear is that people want relevance, words that are relevant to our lives. Well, unless you live under a rock with no access to news, we all have been thinking a lot this week about our nation and its leaders. Many say they have never heard sermons that deal with politics, and don't want to hear any. Perhaps it could be mentioned in the prayer time, in a very general way, so as not to offend anyone. Yet I am reminded of the proverbial "ELEPHANT in the room," when avoidance of an issue never works. And I am also reminded that the prophets in the Bible were almost always addressing national issues and advising or challenging the ruling kings. Our United Church of Christ often refers to the "love and justice" of Jesus, and the history of the U.C.C. is very proud of "firsts" that have shown more inclusiveness or equal rights in society; first woman or gay person ordained, and now our first black Executive Conference Minister.

So, as briefly and as non-partisan as I can... People who think about God or things of the Spirit think about morals all the time, good and bad behavior, what leads to life and what leads to death. Moses is often quoted; "I put before you life and death, choose life!" What we all heard or saw this week were things that led to violence, even death. I'm not sure who first coined the phrase, but Rev. Barry Black, Chaplain of the Senate, said emphatically, "WORDS MATTER," and have the "power of life and death!" Preachers and writers know all too well that words matter; they can make peace, or incite violence. And as usual, there is plenty of blame to go around. Our outgoing president said: "We will walk to the Capitol, and you'll never take back our country with weakness... you need strength." Granted, this can be interpreted as benign; it could mean "make some strong speeches." But the phrase "take back our country" with "strength," can surely imply "do whatever you have to, to stop the election proceedings."

We will let history and courts be the ultimate judge. I often say that we cannot demonize people. We cannot put them in a box called evil. There are degrees of good and bad in all hearts and minds. But what we do somewhat fairly is judge ACTIONS, especially whether they are good or bad with regard to effects on the community, on the greater society. Violence and killing will always be judged as bad, except perhaps in extreme cases of self-defense, and in a "just war." But trying to figure out what WORDS incited violence, or put fuel on the fire is sometimes more difficult; there's plenty of blame to go around. Surely social media and other media outlets can start or fuel fire fires. Surely the leader of a rally can incite. Surely an angry crowd can shout and stir up one another to destructive action.

Our job as people of the Spirit and spiritual leaders is to tell the truth as best we can, which includes sin and failings, and then point people to the Way of our Savior, our Teacher, our Leader, Jesus, the Christ. Our Gospel lesson this morning starts with John the Baptist, giving what he called the "baptism of repentance." Yes, that's all about sin. Again, some people may say: let spiritual leaders talk about sin, but keep it to personal moral failings. Yet the elephant in the room can often be what society is doing to add misery or lift burdens from the people. SYSTEMIC SIN, systemic oppression is a real thing. I just had a call from a suite mate from college. He came down with MS about 8 years ago, now uses a walker, and he had to get top NY city lawyers just to get a few handicap parking spots on the main street in his town. Social justice for anyone marginalized, for anyone who is being held back and discriminated against, is an imperative. President Lincoln quoted The Constitution at Gettysburg, saying our nation was conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all (men) are created equal (need equal treatment and equal access to be part of the community.)

So while in the final analysis, actions matter most, it is often words that move us to action. The Bible, the "Word" of God, gives us

images and words to live by, the highest values, life-giving values. Jesus said, "I send you out as sheep among wolves; therefore be wise as serpents and as harmless as doves." THE DOVE is a symbol of the Holy Spirit that lighted upon Jesus at his baptism, the divine spirit of God that also comes also to each of us. The dove is a symbol of peace and gentleness. This holds true for all of Jesus' ministry; Jesus said "Peace be with you" everywhere he went, or whenever the disciples were afraid. And he said peacemakers were especially blessed. Nowhere does Jesus condone violence, and specifically says put away your swords. Words and teachings matter!

Child psychologists who were interviewed reminded us that we teach children at a young age: Use your words, not your hands or fists. In other words, do not fight, even if the other party is using fighting words! Violence should only be a last, last, LAST resort... if in some corner with no choice but to defend self. This should apply to individual people and to groups, and to nations.

Words matter, so I found a few presidential quotes that may apply to our current situation and peacemaking:

Thomas Jefferson put things very simply: "When angry, count to 10 before you speak. When very angry, count to 100 before you speak!"

Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "There should be no bitterness or hate where the sole thought is the welfare of the U.S.A. (the greater good).

John Fitzgerald Kennedy: "I realize the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war, but we have no more urgent task."

And of course, there's Abraham Lincoln, perhaps one of our most honored presidents, led our nation through the Civil War, voracious self-taught reader, who probably wrote his own speeches! He was a champion for Democracy; he was the one who coined the words "government of the people, by the people, and for the people!" He quoted Jesus, saying "A house divided against itself cannot stand!" He knew Jesus' teachings about enemies. He urged, ... "We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our

bonds of affection....Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" Lincoln knew the value of having of a "team of rivals" as Doris Kearns Goodwin writes. He had the gift of bringing opponents together, Republicans and Democrats, North and South, and was able to preserve the Union. We honor people in Congress who have been able to keep friendships "across the aisles." We honor people who have been able to agree to disagree. We admire people who can compromise, versus remain partisan at any cost.

So as spiritual leaders, we are trying to emphasize the highest values to live by, and surely PEACE, symbolized as a dove, is one of the highest ideals: Making Peace, Showing Love. And because they are difficult tasks, along with President Lincoln we would do well to say "I've been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go." He was a man of prayer, with many values from his study and pursuit of the Way of our Christ.

So let's join another man in prayer, St. Francis of Assisi. At a time like this, we have no where else to go, but to our knees, to a higher power, to God. Like St. Francis, and Jesus praying at his own baptism, we say, "Come Holy Spirit, come Heavenly Dove." I invite you to pray with me as I sing the famous "Prayer of St. Francis," a prayer of peace for ourselves, our country and our world.

(1) Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring your love. Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord, and where there's doubt, true faith in you. (2) Make me a channel of your peace. Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope. Where there is darkness, only light, and where there's sadness, ever joy. O, master, grant that I may never seek so much to be consoled, as to console, to be understood, as to understand, to be loved, as to love with all my soul. (3) Make me a channel of your peace. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, in giving of ourselves that we receive, and in dying that we're born to eternal life.