

## **PENTECOST XXI – 2021**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

*Amen.*

Today we have that powerful passage from Isaiah describing the “suffering servant.” It is timely, for we saw a suffering servant in the flesh this week from Brevard County, Florida, a woman who has been serving on the school board there for the past year. She has taken a stand in favor of mask wearing in the schools and has done so deliberately. She is the mother of a five-year old and she is a teacher herself, which indicates just how much stake she has in the decisions she makes. The other members of the board have voted the same way, but this woman has a particular problem: the opponent she beat in the last election a year ago. Strangely enough, though she won by a big margin, her opponent is claiming that she did not and has been slandering her and harassing her ever since. Now where have we heard of that kind of behavior before?

But this is no mere name-calling. Others have been urged on by this. Someone alleged that she was abusing her daughter and an official had to look under her clothing to see whether there were any cigarette burns on her skin. Some people have been brandishing weapons in front of her neighbors and at her house, and of course, she gets daily death threats. One congressman and some of the news hosts from a particular channel have said she is anti-free speech, seeking to malign her further, which is not the case in the public record: there she is said to have rejected **threatening** speech, harassment, and abusive language in front of her daughter, none of which are considered nor protected as “free speech.”

She has been trying to do the right thing and keep children safe, yet she is suffering persecution as was the suffering servant.

We have a deeply rooted sense of justice in our Judeo-Christian culture, summed up in a biblical phrase “just desserts.” That does not mean that only the just among us get dessert. It means that we believe all people will get what they deserve. It does not always seem that way in our society, especially when we are going through rocky times like these, when some people seem to be getting away with any and every kind of abuse we can imagine. Our problem, I think, is that we want to see those who cause harm suffer consequences in real time, in our time, and that’s not exactly the promise God gave us. God always works “in the fullness of time,” and the problem is that God’s sense of “fullness” is not the same as ours. We think in terms of days and weeks. God thinks in terms of centuries and eons, in terms of eternity, and none of us wants to wait that long. This is a difficult time to “keep the faith,” as it has been for Christians in other cultures and periods of history.

I am very disturbed by some of the directions our country is going in right now. We are not witnessing a difference in principles and ideologies. This is not party politics. We are witnessing raw and base emotions, unchecked prejudices and unrestrained hatreds. And many who know better are standing silent in the face of this. That is complicity.

Where is all this rage, this inner garbage coming from? This is not coming from the mouths of the poor and the downtrodden in our society. Nor is it coming from any actual, present-day suffering. I mean, really, since when does wearing a mask or having to get a vaccine warrant an outrage, death threats, physical attacks, mass shootings. The suffering does not come from the present; it comes

from a fear of the future, the fear of what might happen, the fear that we white folk may no longer be in the majority in this country. And this fear is stoked by radio and TV hosts who have nothing better to do than to try to make other people angry and afraid. It's good for the ratings. They make money from it. And who cares about ethics, anyway. The ethics of numerous broadcast journalists have sunk to the level of social media, where ethics are unchecked, and anything goes. It seems that if you can quote it from someplace, it must be true. So why bother to check it anyway? We are living in the shadow of 1930s Germany, where this kind of behavior and non-thinking went unchecked until it became the dominant culture. There it worked like a machine, like a tank rolling across the land, rolling over everything in the way, with Hitler and his minions cheering it all along. It erupted into a world war, costing countless lives. And in the years after the war, when it was illegal to display a swastika in Germany, the alternative for those who continued to nurse their angers was to fly the confederate flag. Those two symbols have become interchangeable.

We are still in a period where we can take stock of all of this and call a halt to it, yet we have to recognize that even the church is infected with this spiritual malignancy, the self-righteous sense of superiority that has taken over many people. Let us be vigilant and challenge the language of hatred and prejudice when we hear it. God's dream for humanity is not filled with such ugliness of spirit.

This is our common problem. It is age-old. All of the brother myths in Hebrew scripture—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers—they are all about this striving to get more than the other. It wouldn't be so harmful if they were trying to be better than the other, better at goodness, better at kindness, better at mercy and justice and forgiveness, better at loving other human beings, making room in their hearts for all sorts and conditions of people. James and John, as close

as they were to Jesus, missed the point of his teaching. They came to him in order to get preferment over the other disciples, to have what they assumed to be the two places of honor in the kingdom of God. And what did they learn? That Jesus did not see himself at the top of the pyramid, overseeing the whole thing, Jesus saw himself at the bottom, serving all that was above him, serving humankind. That prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah is a profound description of the one who was to come many generations later, the one who would be the true Messiah, not the leader with military might, but the leader who is servant of all.

Twenty-eight years ago this month I was consecrated a bishop, and that began a whole new round of education for me. Inner education. Oh, the church begins with all the glory stuff, the cope and mitre, the ring and the staff—all symbols of authority and honor and rank. The word that we use most often to describe this role is “episcopos” which is Greek for “overseer.” That can really go to one’s head if you let it. Over the years I came to see that another word to describe this role is even more important. It is the Latin word “pontifex,” or “bridge-builder.” A bishop is one who builds bridges, who makes connections, connections with our roots, connections with God’s dreams for the future of humanity, connections with all those among whom we live. And these connections are to be made *with hope* and *in love*, letting go of that seductive camaraderie of shared anger, letting go of all those comparisons of whom we might be better than. The only real goal of being better, is being better than our former selves, better than ourselves when we were more selfish, more self-centered, more egoistic.

It is at times like this that I give thanks especially for St. Paul for all those hymns of hope and confidence that he wrote, for all the love he found in the heart of Jesus, for all the ways he sees the Holy Spirit as

our very present help in every kind of trouble, even in these times in which we live. I want to end with one of those passages from Romans, this one from the middle of the eighth chapter: “For all who live by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” *Amen.*

+JLJ