

Sermon Manuscript – November 13, 2016 @ Our Saviour – Croton-on-Hudson

Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditation upon all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing to you, my God, my Rock and my Redeemer, AMEN!

As a native New Yorker, the spectacle of life in the big city is pretty normal to me. I don't get too wrapped up in or distracted by the glamour of city life. When I walk through Manhattan, it's usually with a purpose of getting from one place to another and my eyes are laser-focused on navigating through the sea of people and vehicles that are positioned in my way. I'm used to seeing unusual people doing unusual things and I'm even used to seeing celebrities on the streets of New York without taking extraordinary notice of them. People who drive with me in New York will tell you that I'm in no way overwhelmed by the density and intensity of the traffic and that I'm quite comfortable connecting with my inner taxi-driver while weaving my way undistracted along the avenues. And, I definitely don't walk there while uncomfortably craning my neck to see the tops of tall buildings as if I had never been there before. Those of you who have visited the city know what I'm talking about. You've seen those out-of-town tourists, many of whom come to New York for the first time and are just gaga over the spectacle of the big city. The ones who stop and take pictures of everything they haven't seen before – the painted people in Times Square, the famous city landmarks and the waterfront views from the beautiful bridges and paths that span and line the city's waterways. The same tourists that try to walk through the city ogling upward at some of the tallest buildings in the world, only to be jolted back to reality when they run into something stationary like a corner mailbox. Eventually something or someone always grabs the attention of these distracted tourists to help them realize that there might be more important things on which to focus other than what had their gaze at the moment.

Something like this happened to the disciples in the story from today's Gospel. We need to remember that these disciples were from the Galilee, many of them simple fisherman from a rural village. They would have been considered the country bumpkins of their day, and it is likely that this journey with Jesus was the first time that any of them had been to a city like Jerusalem. They were amazed by what they were seeing. I'm sure they had heard stories of the grandeur of the great Temple, the one that Herod had not only restored, but had doubled in size from its original footprint. With no ability to see images of the Temple in pictures, movies or Google Earth, the disciples were overwhelmed by the glory of something that they couldn't possibly have imagined, even through the stories of friends and relatives who visited Jerusalem and came back to share their stories of the big city.

The Temple was indeed an impressive edifice. Including its outer courts, where the disciples would have walked, some have estimated it at 1500 feet in length and 10-15 stories tall. When the disciples would have first seen the temple from the valley below the city, it may have appeared 45 stories tall, an unprecedented and majestic sight. As they climbed the mount to enter the temple courts, they would likely have done so by passing through one of several imposing gates, nearly as tall as the temple itself. And upon entering the outer courts, the disciples would have been awed by the amount of activity taking place, the commercial economy that thrived off of the temple's sacrificial system, and the sheer size of the stones that had been hewn and stacked to form the walls and columns that held the temple together.

In addition to the temple's physical presence in the city of Jerusalem, it carried significant social and political symbolism in its time. For many, the temple which had been restored by Herod, was a statement that someday Herod would **make Israel great again**, hearkening back to the great days of King Solomon and the memories of a prosperous, unified and independent nation. For others, the temple was a symbol of systemic corruption and

exclusion, as each of the outer courts indicated who could have access and who could not. The first outer court was called the Court of Gentiles, named because non-Jews could gather there, but were prevented from passing any further inside. It was in this court that the temple economy was expressed in the form of selling animals for the sacrifices which went on further inside. The next was the Court of Women, after which only Jewish men could have access to the inner courts of the temple. Then there were parts where only the priests could enter and perform the ritual sacrifices, excluding any common people and finally, in the innermost rooms of the temple was the Holy of Holies, the place where God was thought to dwell and where only the High Priest could enter once per year. Still, despite these very visible signs of exclusion and the reminders of who had the power in those days, for many, the temple was a distraction because it symbolized the hope of a nation brought back to former glory.

Jesus' followers, not unlike New York City tourists, would have been enchanted by what they were seeing, mesmerized by the sheer scale of what was in front of them, completely distracted by what was dominating their perspective at the moment. They were chattering amongst themselves about the magnificence of what Herod had commissioned and became distracted with wonder. This went on until Jesus stood his ground like that New York City mailbox and demanded they shift their attentions back to him – and his words were shocking. Can you imagine what the disciples were thinking? After taking in all the grandeur of the big city and its most imposing landmark; after dreaming about how great again the newly restored kingdom would be like under King Jesus; after musing about how they might live in the city as Lords and not working class Galilleans? Jesus told them that as great as this looks now, don't count on it. Don't rely on it. Don't give it more attention than it deserves. Because it will not last. It will go away. It will come tumbling down. It will let you down. Don't be distracted by this most temporary of symbols. Instead, Jesus says to keep your eyes focused on me and it is

through my view of the world, my love for the world, my sacrifice for the world, through my breaking down the walls of exclusion that you will find the true greatness in life.

My friends, I think we've been very distracted this week. I know I have been. On Tuesday evening, I opened my computer at around 8PM to start looking at the early Presidential election returns which were coming in. I was not so surprised to see that Donald Trump had an early lead in the electoral college, since most of those early poll-closing states were solidly RED, with BLUE state polls closing later at 9PM, or on the West Coast, as late as midnight here in the east. As 9PM passed and early results from the newly closed polls were posted, I started to see a pattern that almost nobody expected, that Trump was beating Clinton in several key states and an upset was in the making. Then states like Florida and Ohio, which had supported President Obama in the previous two campaigns, went decidedly for Trump, the momentum became palpable. Then states considered to be leaning toward Clinton, Pennsylvania and then Wisconsin were called for Trump, the election was indeed over and Donald Trump was going to be the next President of the United States of America. Wow!

In the ensuing days following this most incredible turn of the tide, we all became completely distracted by what this meant for our futures. For some, the Trump election was a victory, a symbol of America rediscovering its way to be great again. 60 million citizens were willing to vote for a man whose grand persona is indeed larger than life, while looking past the ruthlessness of his character which has left victims in his wake for decades, sacrificed at the altar of his business and his own ego. It remains to be seen if Trump can deliver on that promise to his followers, and what that vision of a great-again America will look like. Sadly, I think Trump supporters will be disillusioned before long. For others, the Trump victory was a reminder that there remain forces in our country that are fond of the traditional social boundaries that stand as high walls between women, minorities, immigrants, same-sex couples

and others, preventing access to equal rights and equal opportunities. They see the Trump Presidency as a monster who will gobble up freedoms and progress made in recent years. The amount of hatred being spewed by both sides is appalling, disgusting and dangerous to our very souls. For Christians, our focus on the Trump Presidency has distracted us from the one voice that should matter to us, the same voice that told his disciples “Beware that you are not led astray, for many will come and say “I am he” or “the time is near”. DO NOT GO AFTER THEM!

When Martin Luther thought about what made the church, the church he listed six expressions of the church that it traditionally considered part of its identity. But he added a seventh mark which I think is important for us to think about today as we look beyond our distraction to Jesus as the one and only voice who calls us. That seventh mark of the church was struggle, what Luther called the “Holy possession of the sacred cross”. Luther may have been thinking about this very gospel text when he identified this expression of the church, one expression that calls the church to live out its existence in public life, struggling with those who might be suffering in the world and giving testimony so that this suffering is noticed and corrected. In the Gospel text, we take notice that Jesus does not promise to protect us from struggle or suffering, but to stand with us as the church speaks the very words of Christ against powerful forces who will not take notice and will not take responsibility to correct systemic abuse of the poor and vulnerable, and systemic exclusion of women, minorities, gays, and others from access to economic opportunity and legal protections.

In a country where separation of church and state is an important, though often misunderstood value, you might wonder where I am headed right now. Well, let me be clear, though I voted for Hillary Clinton, I won't stand here and denounce the President-elect with hate in my heart. I will honor the legal will of the American public and stand in support of him and the office he will occupy. I will pray for God to grant him wisdom, patience, compassion

and repentance so that the way in which he governs will stand in contrast to the way in which he campaigned. This does not mean, however, that I will be silent, and the church should not be silent if the policies of a Trump administration cause harm to people without voices of their own. In 1933, German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the first to warn his countrymen about the Nazi regime that had just ascended to power and the abuses that were coming, particularly toward the Jewish minority. He saw a church in his homeland that was passive, if not outright supportive of a new government that promised prosperity, but was willing to engage in ruthless means to achieve it. As we think about what our testimony will be, what our witness to Jesus Christ will be, what our role will be as it relates to the new government, perhaps Bonhoeffer's exhortation to the church 83 years ago is a model to think about today. In his essay "The Church and the Jewish Question", Bonhoeffer wrote of a three-fold responsibility that the church has in holding the government accountable to the values set forth by the Gospel:

1. Questioning the character of the government's actions and making government responsible for what it does.
2. Service to all victims of the government's actions, even those who do not belong to the Christian community.
3. Not just service to the victims, but to bring unjust actions of the government to a halt, through political action (taking control of the wheel)

My friends, this will not be easy. We know how deeply entrenched the power systems are in our own country. But we also know how deeply entrenched the Gospel commands to love God, to love one another, and to love even our enemies is in the heart of our faith in Jesus Christ. And we know because of God's promises that our faith is something that will stand the test of struggle, and the test of time. The walls of the Temple will crumble. A Trump presidency will be temporary. But we the children of God have something precious to carry us through the distractions and through the struggles – the promise that not a hair of our head will

perish, the promise that our struggle will be life-giving to ourselves and to others, the promise that God loves us and has claimed us for Christ, for the Gospel and for love itself. Amen!

And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guide our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen!