

I AM TIRED!  
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June 19, 2016

I am tired. My soul is weary. I am tired of once again having to text Dennis our custodian, to tell him that the President of the United States has called for all flags to be at half-staff following another mass shooting for the third in a year. I'm tired of walking into a house of worship in Norfolk for a long planned Interfaith Service of Unity and Love to celebrate Pridefest and having to see the pictures of 49 LGBT and straight people killed for being who God created them to be. I'm tired of walking past armed security guards at the doors of that synagogue because of fear of another deranged person attacking. I'm tired of supposed ministers calling for LGBT people to be lined up against a wall and shot. I'm tired of people being killed for who they are or what they believe or just simply because they had the misfortune to be in the wrong place. I'm tired of hate dressed up as religion.

So once again I find myself writing a sermon in the wake of another tragic mass shooting. Once again I've put the prayer of St. Francis back into our prayers this morning just as I did after the Santa Barbara shooting. In the words of the hymn the "Church is one foundation," *Our cry goes up how long*, rings in my ears. How ironic that we find the healing of the Gerasene demonic in Luke as our reading this week. I wonder how many times he in his few lucid moments and his family and friends asked that question of God. How long God?

How long must he be tormented by the many demons that said they were legion that possessed this man and seem to possess our world? The word he used literally meant an army of 4000-6000 men. We too cry out how long will this violence continue. How long must the demons of hatred and violence plague our world? Why can't we banish this legion of hate to the swine on the hillside and drive them into the sea?

When I first started to write this sermon I had intended to spend time talking about evil and demons. Now that is a topic sure to make the average Episcopalian very very nervous. Most of us would prefer to explain the man's actions as those of someone who is violently mentally ill. Yet what about those pigs who are the recipients of the demons and rush head long over the cliff?

I think however that we have seen enough evil, enough demons in the past week to believe they exist therefore, I feel called to head in another direction. That direction is to examine what are we as Christians, called to do in response to the hatred that we see. For hatred is the problem, violence is only the symptom.

For a while this year one of the big topics in the political debates was about deficits and how much debt the country has run up. I believe however there is a

much greater deficit that threatens our country than one with dollar signs attached. I believe the deficit that threatens us, all of us, is a compassion deficit. We as a country and a world have for the most part forgotten how to be compassionate to the other. The level of conflict has grown to a point where the other is now demonized and the only response once conflict has escalated to this point is the desire to destroy the other. That is about as far from the teaching and example of Christ as we can get. However from the standpoint of conflict resolution theory this is the point we have reached and it frightens me. For conflict resolution theory teaches that once this level of conflict has been reached it is almost impossible to back down, but we know that nothing is impossible for God.

Compassion means “a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering.”<sup>1</sup> Wednesday night we watched a video from the Living the Questions series and the segment was entitled Compassion, the Heart of Jesus’ Ministry. When Jesus is met by the demoniac he treats him with compassion. Just as he did with the sinful woman last week and in the story of the hemorrhaging woman that follows this story. Jesus sees suffering and the Bible often says he is filled with compassion. He feeds the 5000 because he is filled with compassion. Acting with compassion to the other is how Jesus responded to people and to conflict.

This weekend has seen the Pridefest celebration in Norfolk. On Tuesday there was an interfaith service at a synagogue in Ghent. This is the service I referenced at the beginning of this sermon. This is the service where the city sent two armed police officers to guard the entrance. There were several people who spoke from a variety of faith traditions, I’m proud to say two were Episcopal and The Rev. Andy Rohrs and Susan Pederson were among the organizers. The many speakers could have spoken with hate, with anger at what they had and have experienced yet the message from speaker after speaker was that Love Unites. One quoted Martin Luther king who said, “Hate does not destroy hate, only love destroys hate.” Hate only leads to more hate. To that I would add compassion overcomes hate. This is because compassion forces us to see the other as a beloved child of God.

The big problem is that we are so polarized today that we cannot see the other as a beloved child of God. Without that realization, compassion and unity is impossible. I understand the anger that is out there. I know people who have had their jobs disappear and they cannot find work that comes close to paying what they made and nobody seems to care. I’m still paying off student debt from my son James and most of his friends have debt left to pay for years. I had owned a home for 10 years by the time I was my older son’s age. I understand the frustration and anger of millennials. The normal human reaction is to strike and blame the other. The immigrant, the Mexican the whomever, the real issue is

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/compassion?s=t>

they feel that nobody cares and worse, nobody wants to do anything to help, to alleviate their suffering. In short they are feeling the compassion deficit.

Now lest you feel there is no hope out there, I want to tell you a story about how God can open a person's heart to feel compassion for the other, for a person they thought was a terrible person. A classmate of mine told me this story and it was about her own come to Jesus moment. This is shared with permission although I will not use her real name.

Linda was from a very conservative part of the country and a member of a very conservative Episcopal parish. She was working in a hospital as a lay chaplain during the AIDS crisis. She didn't like visiting the AIDS patients. She thought that the way they lived was sinful and that they probably were going to hell for their actions. One afternoon she was called to see a young man who was dying. The family had been called to say goodbye. As they left his sister turned back and came over to the bed and Linda was standing by the door. With tears in her eyes the sister said, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry you have to die and I'm so sorry I will never see you again, because when you die I know you are going to hell." Then she turned and walked out the door.

Stunned by what she had seen my friend broke down in tears and did something she had never done before. She took off the mask, the gown and the gloves she was wearing. They wore these to protect the patient more than the staff. She went over to the man and took his hand and wiped away the tears in his eyes with the first real human touch he had experienced in months. Then she said, "Don't listen to her. God loves you." She knew in that moment that this is what Jesus would have done. So, filled with compassion, she reached out to one that she considered other and saw him for what he was, a beloved child of God in need of the assurance that he was in fact a beloved child of God. She stayed with him that night until he passed. Her life was changed forever and she became an advocate for AIDS patients and the LGBT community.

You see compassion heals people and everyone is entitled to be treated with compassion. Approaching a person with compassion changes the dynamics and will pull the conflict back to a manageable level. Is this hard work? Absolutely! Is this how love unites? Yes absolutely.

That was the message I gained sitting there in the midst of the LGBT community Tuesday night. Love unites, love will define their community not hate. Love unites needs to be how we as a church move forward in this horribly fractured world. So my friends practice love, practice compassion this week as you interact with people. Practice compassion as you read or listen to the news. Banish hate from your mind. This is not easy and will take practice but remember compassion is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and must be at the heart of our ministry as Christians.