

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, August 14, 2022
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca

There is no denying that there is much to be dismayed about in the world and in the church today. Mainline Christianity is on the decline; Christian Nationalism is on the rise. There is more focus on getting power, wealth, and influence for oneself and those in one's own tribe, rather than exercising compassion and grace for the common good. Powerful, corrupting forces are at work. Downright hatred for those who do not vote, worship, or speak like the majority of Americans is increasing and is doing so unapologetically. It is no wonder that many have become discouraged about the future.

The current atmosphere reminds me of a conversation in Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring. After Gandolf explains to Frodo the history of the ring; its powerful, corrupting influence and the return of the ring's maker, the evil Sauron, Frodo says, "I wish it need not have happened in my time." "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

What will we do with the time that is given us? Will we rise to the challenge that is set before us? Will we continue to follow Jesus' way of radical love or will we give in to the powers and principalities that have taken hold? In the gospel today from Luke, Jesus is more than fed up with those who will not listen to the vision that God has for the world. He is on fire with the revelation of God's love, and wants that love to be embodied in all people. Jesus acknowledges that pursuing God's dream, will bring not peace, but division. Even in our families, even amongst our closest friends, there will be those who do not understand our passion for justice or our willingness to lend assistance to those who can never reciprocate. There will be those who actively try to stop us.

Keeping the peace by staying silent in the face of injustice-protecting the status quo -instead of working for change-might reduce conflict (through avoidance) but will never bring about the peace of God that passes all understanding. It is difficult (to say the least) to challenge the thinking of those who are only in it for themselves and their tribe, but this is the work we have been given to do- to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors, (ALL our neighbors) as ourselves. No doubt about it- it is tough to do.

When the going gets tough, I wonder, what does it take to keep you going? When our oldest daughter ran cross-country in high school, she asked me to wait for her $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up the infamous Green Monster trail in Windham. At a certain place on the trail, she wanted me to cheer her on by name. After leaving the grueling hill, she knew she would need a fresh burst of confidence in order to dash for the finish line. The reading today from Hebrews gives a similar image "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every

weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." In the ancient world, runners would finish their last lap in the stadium, much like they do in our modern Olympics. Hearing the crowd cheer them on would bolster the confidence of the exhausted runners, giving them the encouragement they needed to finish the course.

This great cloud of witnesses- these on-lookers- are our spiritual ancestors, those saints that kept the faith in their day, continuing to follow the teachings of Jesus instead of keeping up with societal norms and expectations. They did what needed to be done, even though they faced hostility, ridicule, and shame. They were made destitute, persecuted, tortured, and imprisoned.

And although they did not see the fruits of their labor, though God's kingdom did not come on earth as it is in heaven in their lifetimes, they stayed the course and kept the faith. They knew that they were not alone. They knew that God was with them in all their trials. They looked to Jesus- to his life, his ministry, and his teaching to show them how to live. They prayed for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to guide them, inspire them, and strengthen them. This is the communion of saints surrounds us and cheers us on as we run the race that has been set before us. We cannot see them, but their words still echo through the centuries, giving us advice and encouragement when times are troubling.

1) Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing dismay you. All things pass.

God never changes. Patience attains all that it strives for.

Those who have God find they lack nothing. God alone suffices. (Teresa of Avila)

2) "Lay all your cares about the future trustingly in God's hands, and let yourself be guided by the Lord just like a little child." (Edith Stein)

3) "Live in faith and hope, though it be in darkness, for in this darkness God protects the soul. Cast your care upon God for you are His and He will not forget you. Do not think that He is leaving you alone, for that would be to wrong Him." (St. John of the Cross)

4) "Our perfection does not consist of doing extraordinary things, but to do the ordinary well." – St. Gabriel Possenti

5) "The nation doesn't simply need what we have. It needs what we are." St. Teresa Benedicta."

And of course, the great cloud of witnesses is not made up only of the famous saints who are recognized by the church, but by all the ordinary saints, the ones we have known and loved; the ones who have nurtured us, taught us, coached us, who have encouraged us in our lives, and who cheer us on still. What might they be saying to you today?

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.