

Dear Friend
Sunday, January 28, 2024, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

“If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”

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On July 23, 1939, Mahatma Gandhi sat at his typewriter and wrote a short letter that to my eyes is one of the most remarkable letters ever written.

I want to read it to you.

“Dear Friend, Gandhi writes,

“Friends have been urging me to write to you for the sake of humanity. But I have resisted their request, because of the feeling that any letter from me would be an impertinence. Something tells me that I must not calculate and that I must make my appeal for whatever it may be worth.

“It is quite clear that you are today the one person in the world who can prevent a war which may reduce humanity to the savage state. Must you pay that price for an object however worthy it may appear to you to be? Will you listen to the appeal of one who had deliberately shunned the method of war not without considerable success?”

“Anyway, I anticipate your forgiveness, if I have erred in writing to you.

*“I remain, your sincere friend,
“M. K. Gandhi.”*

Dear friend, Gandhi wrote.

Dear friend.

The recipient of the letter was Adolf Hitler.

It was not the last time Gandhi would write Hitler.

A year and a half later, on Christmas Eve, 1940 – as the policy of forced immigration of Jews was preparing to turn into the Holocaust and the Third Reich had moved into Poland, Gandhi once again reached out with those same words:

“Dear friend,”

And then Gandhi followed, in part...

“That I address you as a friend is no formality. I own no foes. My business in life has been for the past 33 years to enlist the friendship of the whole of humanity by befriending mankind, irrespective of race, colour or creed. I hope you will have the time and desire to know how a good portion of humanity who have been living under the influence of that doctrine of universal friendship view your action.

“We have no doubt about your bravery or devotion to your fatherland, nor do we believe that you are the monster described by your opponents.

“But your own writings and pronouncements and those of your friends and admirers leave no room for doubt that many of your acts are monstrous and unbecoming of human dignity, especially in the estimation of men like me who believe in universal friendliness. Such are your humiliation of Czechoslovakia, the rape of Poland and the swallowing of Denmark. I am aware that your view of life regards such spoliations as virtuous acts. But we have been taught from childhood to regard them as acts degrading humanity. Hence, we cannot possibly wish success to your arms...

“You are leaving no legacy to your people of which they would feel proud. They cannot take pride in a recital of cruel deed, however skilfully planned. I, therefore, appeal to you in the name of humanity to stop the war.”

And later, he closed..

*“I am,
“Your sincere friend,
“M. K. Gandhi”*

Dear friend, Gandhi wrote.

Dear friend.

There is something so incredibly powerful in those words.

I’m not saying that Gandhi had any hope that his words would sway Hitler or even that his recommended strategy of nonviolence against the Third Reich would have been successful ... Gandhi himself would not even make that claim. Only that continuing on the road of violence would, regardless of who emerged victorious, continue a cycle of violence that would continue to consume the world. And in that, we have all too clearly discovered, Gandhi was right.

No, what makes these letters so powerful is at least two things.

The first is that Gandhi spoke his truth. He did not shy away from in very specific terms calling out both the monstrous acts of Adolf Hitler and the horrendous evil that would happen should they continue. He did not keep silent at a time when so many Christians in Germany and elsewhere were keeping silent in the face of the expansion of the Third Reich and the beginning of the Holocaust.

He did not keep silent because like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he understood that “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

And certainly, like Bonhoeffer, Gandhi believed “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” Because that’s exactly what Gandhi did with his campaign of nonviolent noncooperation against the British Empire in India.

What Gandhi refused to do was not only not demonize his opponents but refer to them as anything but friends.

“Dear friend,” Gandhi wrote to Hitler. “Dear friend.”

A generation or more later, Nelson Mandela would come to the same conclusion in prison on Robben Island ... that those we might see as enemies we must instead see as future friends. Not as a policy of appeasement but because the only way we can stop the cycle of violence and oppression is through the power of love. For Mandela there were only two enemies a human being could have – prejudice and narrow-mindedness.

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus says ““If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”

I am challenged to find another verse of scripture that has been used more effectively for the enforcement of the status quo than this one. Certainly in the Episcopal Church it was quoted -- and still is -- with great enthusiasm by those who would wish lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual and queer people to stay closeted for the comfort of those who were in the grasp of those enemies of the human spirit that Mandela named.

I have lost count of the times that I and so many others more than me have been called divisive not because we actively sowed division but merely pointed out the division and inequity that already exists.

In the church, we have an unfortunate and even tragic habit of using these words of Jesus to do exactly what Gandhi and Bonhoeffer refused to do as an article of faith – remain silent in the face of evil.

Even Abraham Lincoln is deputized into this argument. And ... it must be noted that not only did Lincoln quote this scripture in 1958 in a speech before the Illinois State Republican Convention in a race for Senate against Stephen Douglass that he would lose ... he said recognizing that a union united in injustice was less acceptable than a union divided against itself.

Lincoln said:

"We are now far into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.

Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented.

In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed -

"A house divided against itself cannot stand."

I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.

I do not expect the Union to be dissolved - I do not expect the house to fall - but I do expect it will cease to be divided.

It will become all one thing, or all the other."

Lincoln saw that union around the cause of justice for all was not going to come by avoiding the crisis of division but by expecting and even embracing it.

"In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free."

We are more divided in this nation now than any time since Lincoln said those words. We are divided in our families. We are even divided in this church ... perhaps not politically or even theologically but about how we see this church changing.

Make no mistake, unity can be an idol ... and a tempting one at that. Particularly if we have power and if the status quo gives us comfort, we can trumpet unity with great enthusiasm as a preservation of our comfort while suppressing the voices of those who would point out the deep cost of maintaining the way things are.

And, yet unity is also our goal and God's dream for us.

For as many problems as I have with St. Paul ... and as much as I am convinced he was dearly in need of an editor ... his letters to the church in Corinth in the midst of deep division and conflict remain some of the most powerful articles of Christian theology.

“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Godself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

Reconciliation is about bridging the divides between us. About healing the wounds between us. And the Greek word Paul uses here is *katalasso*, which means to exchange places with one another. That means the road to healing division, the road to the united house that will stand is not defeating an opponent, it is identifying with them. It is feeling the wound that leads them to hate, much as our own wounds can tempt us in that folly. Because when we wound each other ... whether monstrously like Hitler or in any other way ... the root of it is our own woundedness. And when we wound out of our woundedness we only create more wounds and the cycle continues.

So when Jesus says “If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand,” he is not talking about a simplistic “can we all get along” of maintaining the status quo of keeping some people in their oppressed place that is about what so many tried to twist Rodney King’s words into in May, 1992 ... but what King was really talking about which was getting through the crisis of which Lincoln spoke to a new place of healing and reconciliation.

In a few months, Ann Lamott is going to be back here at All Saints Church, and when she comes I need to thank her. Because the last time she was here, she gave me a piece of wisdom that helped me not only live through the Trump administration but helped shape how I am approaching the rise of Christian Nationalism and this current election cycle.

Someone in the audience asked Ann what she thought about Donald Trump and she said, “when I look at Donald Trump, I see someone who shows no evidence of ever having been loved.”

And instantly, something in me shifted.

I didn’t stop thinking that Donald Trump should not be allowed to hold any power anywhere.

I didn’t stop thinking that his presidency and the ease with which the system of our government transitioned into his theology of prejudice and narrow-mindedness was evidence that

Bonhoeffer's wisdom of driving a spoke into the wheels of injustice that are driving this country was Gospel truth.

What Ann Lamott's words did was activate my heart of compassion. It helped me see Donald Trump as a tragic figure ... all the more tragic for the impact he was having but tragic in his own right because indeed this is what a life without love looks like.

Ann Lamott's words awakened a piece of my heart that made we want to write a letter to him that began "dear friend."

And that is my hope for us as All Saints Church. And I truly believe it is who God dreams for us to be. A community that is unflinching in our quest for justice.

A community that refuses to remain silent in the midst of horrendous evil, knowing that "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil... Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."

A community that is as determined as ever not "to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice," but "to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."

A community that is as determined as ever to speak the truth to the powers that are oppressing and killing the people of God here and around the world in the same way that Gandhi spoke that truth to Hitler.

And ... a community that always begins those entreaties with the words

"Dear friend."

For the moment we see each other, and not the forces of prejudice and narrow-mindedness as the enemy is the moment that those forces claim victory not only over this world but over our souls.

Make no mistake, this is not a call to what South African theologian Allan Aubrey Boesak calls "political pietism and Christian quietism" ...

This is not a call to a lowest common denominator of comfort for those who are already comfortable.

And this is certainly not a call to the conflation of sowing division with the pointing out that there are currently deep divides and inequities among us.

It is a call to acknowledge that truly following Jesus' wisdom that "If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand" means not lashing out against each other in hate but speaking truth to each other in love.

It is a call to acknowledge that though we absolutely must drive a spoke into the wheel of the systems that oppress we must never conflate the people who populate the systems with the evil of the systems themselves.

It is a call to begin every deep telling of truth to those who would oppose us and oppose everything we believe in with the same two words.... Dear friend. Amen.