

They Shall Never Be Silent
Sunday, February 12, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Susan Russell

Upon your walls, daughter Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all the day and all the night, they shall never be silent.

They shall never be silent ... these truth tellers, these justice proclaimers, these whistleblowers Isaiah tells us about in this morning's reading. These ones who inherit the legacy of the persistent widow in Luke's gospel ... who went again and again to the unjust judge until she received justice – not because he suddenly became a just judge but because she “kept bothering him” until she simply wore him down.

These ones who follow in the footsteps of Chloe's people of First Corinthians fame ... who wrote to Paul with the news that their colleagues in Corinth were sowing polarization and division rather than reaping love and inclusion -- taking the Beloved Community of God's abundant love Paul planted there during his visit and turning it into a hierarchical system arguing about who was in and who was out based on who was baptized by who and whether you agreed with them – causing Paul to write: “My brothers and sisters, Chloe's people have informed me that there are quarrels among you ...” and reminding them in some of the most oft-quoted words in all of scripture that “the greatest of these is love.”

These are for me historical data points worth remembering as we navigate the hand-wringing and pearl-clutching about the challenges of being church together in the 21st century ... reminding us that it wasn't all sunshine and roses in first century either – that we are not the first generation to struggle with living out this follow Jesus thing.

Friends, Jesus had barely finished ascending to heaven to sitteth on the right hand of the Father and already we needed Chloe's people to call Paul's people with a first century version of “Houston, we have a problem.” The church couldn't make it past “soft launch” mode without needing sentinels willing to speak truth to power, to be truth tellers, to refuse to be silent when the gospel values of love, justice and compassion were being distorted into weapons of discord, division and competition – centralizing power rather than centering love.

It is a story as old as Isaiah and as new as the latest news update on your iPhone.

And this call to speak out – to speak up – to never be silent -- is part of our ancient spiritual heritage as old as the prophet Isaiah and Chloe's people from Corinth ... because so are the powers that sought to silence the sentinels then and seeks to silence them still.

In the 1980's during the fierce vortex of the battle against AIDS the slogan “Silence equals death” was born ... a truth that taught those of us who were raised with the axiom “if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all” that when there is literally nothing nice to say

saying nothing is not an option.

Saying nothing not only isn't an option – staying silent makes us complicit with systems of domination and oppression antithetical to everything Jesus called us to become as Beloved Community ... as members of the Jesus Movement ... as repairers of the breach ... as salt for the earth ... and light to the nations.

A recent case in point is happening as we speak across the pond with our Church of England siblings ... where if you're someone who binge watches **As The Anglican World Turns**, a new series of episodes have just dropped.

To catch you up, the Church of England has been immersed in a years-long initiative called "Living in Love and Faith" encouraging members to "grow together" on issues of sexuality, identity, relationships and marriage. A recent set of pronouncements by their bishops and decisions by their Synod have resulted in a change in CofE policy to permit the blessing of same-sex relationships.

It is a step that has predictably whipped up the usual suspects into their customary ranting about heresy, apostasy and the irreparable rent of the fabric of the Anglican Communion. It is also a step that falls ludicrously and dramatically short of providing equity for the LGBTQ people, perpetuating de facto sacramental apartheid, convincing the increasing majority of Brits that the Church of England is an irrelevant vestigial organ of an anachronistic past at best and a hotbed of hypocritical homophobia at worst.

And absolutely none of this has done **anything** to advance the theoretical mission of the church -- which is to proclaim the Good News of God's inclusive love for absolutely everyone made present for us in the person of Jesus ... who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another.

For those of us who have lived through the Anglican Inclusion Wars on this side of the pond, it feels eerily familiar for some and PTSD producing for others.

Yes, we have crossed the Rubicon in the Episcopal Church and revised our canons to make the sacrament of marriage available to all ... but there is still work to do ensure that unfettered access to those marriage rites does not depend on the zip code in which you reside. And there is still SO much work to do protect trans people in general and trans youth in particular both in our church and in our nation. There is **so much** not to be silent about.

And yet, where the Church of England finds itself today on the arc of history bending toward justice for LGBTQ people is just about where we were in 2012 when the Episcopal Church approved blessings for same-sex couples. But we didn't stop there.

We appointed a Task Force on Marriage which worked from 2012-2018 to secure "marriage rites for the whole church." And then in 2022 we appointed a Task Force on LGBTQ+ Inclusion

"to continue our becoming "The Beloved Community;" a charism of which is a church that functions with equity and care for the whole body, including its LGBTQ+ members." I was honored to be asked to chair that Task Force and our work begins when we meet for the next month for the first time.

The arc of history is long and it bends toward justice, inclusion and equity ... but it doesn't bend by itself. It bends because we come together day after day, time after time, setback after setback, incremental step after incremental step forward ... refusing to rest until that kingdom come on earth we pray for every time we gather ceases to be something for which we pray and becomes something in which we live. Refusing to leave anyone behind in that journey. And refusing to be silent.

So today my prayers go out to our siblings in the struggle across the pond -- lifting up especially Jayne Ozanne, Colin Coward and all those sentinels we have partnered and labored with lo these many years.

And my thanksgivings go out for all those on whose shoulders we stand as we continue to do this work -- this holy work -- to which we have been called. From Dr. Louie Crew to Bishop Barbara Harris of blessed memory ... to all the innumerable voices of witness who have brought us thus far on the way -- those sentinels who knew their job was never to be silent.

Now the Anglican Inclusion Wars and the work for equity for LGBTQ people in the Episcopal Church are inarguably a very tiny subset of the kaleidoscope of challenges that face us as we seek to build Beloved Community in our beautiful and broken world ... but I believe there are some object lessons to be learned there that can inform the wider work of dismantling oppression in all its forms.

If Jesus was right in today's reading from Matthew and Wisdom is "**vindicated by her deeds**" then everything I needed to know about ... oh let's just pick resisting the forces working to dismantle our constitutional democracy out of the hat ... I learned in the trenches of the Anglican Inclusion Wars, as we resisted the forces working to dismantle the Episcopal Church.

I learned that there is no compromising with those who believe they have Sole Possession of the Absolute Truth.

I learned that while we were meeting to negotiate how we would move forward together in spite of our differences, they were orchestrating an exit-strategy that involved litigation, property disputes and the demonization anyone and anything that challenged their patriarchal worldview.

I learned that the same theocratic zealotry that infused the Puritans who abandoned the Church of England because of its comprehensiveness in the 17th century was ironically alive and well in the 21st century -- attempting to reinvent Anglicanism in its own image: straight, White, male-dominated and biblical literalist.

I learned that part of their playbook was to attempt to gaslight the rest of us into the fiction that they were the ones who were the victims here -- an assertion that flies in the face of the reality that there is an ontological difference between feeling excluded because you are disagreed with ...
... and being excluded because of who you are.

And I learned that unexamined privilege can be an insurmountable impediment to embracing diversity as a gift rather than attacking it as a threat.

Nevertheless, we persisted.
We resisted.

And we're going to need to keep on doing both
If we are going to save our nation
from devolving into a kind of theocratic oligarchy,
those who believe that science and data are things --
those who embrace the vision of a nation
where liberty and justice for all literally means all --
must provide an antidote to the toxins of ignorance and "alternative facts" threatening our constitutional democracy with polarization and division.

And to do that we need to be as willing to speak out in our day as Chloe's people were in theirs
... inheriting the call we heard in the reading this morning from Isaiah:

Upon your walls, daughter Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all the day and all the night, **they shall never be silent.**

They shall never be silent.
And neither shall we.

La lucha continua ... the struggle continues ... and we are in it to win it. Because nothing less than that kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven we pray for every time we gather is good enough for Jesus ... or for us.

So let us all pray for courage ...
each and every one of us ...
to ask God to send us into the boats that need rocking,
to tell the truths that need telling,
to work through the hard ground that needs breaking through.

Courage to work to end violence in all its forms
and to pray for both victim and perpetrator

as we seek healing and wholeness
for absolutely every member of the human family.

Courage to speak up to end the politicization
of public health policies in general
and the victimization of trans youth as political pawns in particular.

Courage to afflict those who are so comfortable
in their unexamined white privilege
that they are blind to the systemic racism that surrounds us.

Courage to learn from climate scientists
what we must do to be stewards of this fragile earth, our island home
and make us people who reject the false narrative
that we must choose between science and faith.

Finally, and most importantly
courage to claim the resurrection promise,
that is the foundation of our faith:
trusting that absolutely nothing
can separate us from the love of God
which is the way of Wisdom:

*Come and seek the ways of wisdom,
she who danced when earth was new.
Follow closely what she teaches,
for her words are right, and true.
Wisdom clears the path to justice,
showing us what love must do.*

Amen.