**Last Pentecost**

**November 22, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

A week ago Friday 130 people were killed in the attack by Islamic extremists in Paris. It was a shocking display of violence in a city known for light and joy. The world responded with deep expressions of grief and solidarity for the French people.

However, since then there has been a hue and cry from governors and some presidential candidates that the United States refuse to offer a haven to Syrian refugees. This is out of fear that one of them may turn out to be a Muslim terrorist. And the rhetoric is not limited to those seeking to occupy the White House, or those who are sitting in state capitols. One of our local politicians posted on Facebook this week: “As individuals we are to strive to live like our Savior. However as a nation, as a matter of national policy, we must place more value on American life than all other life.” And he went on to say, “I am sorry that women and children are suffering in Syria. I really am. But I'm not sorry enough to risk my wife and children suffering here [by allowing Syrian refugees to settle in the United States].”

I think most of you know me well enough to know that I strongly disagree with this kind of fearful rhetoric and the ideology behind it. I take seriously what Jesus took seriously, and in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me … “ However, rather than just argue about this issue from the pulpit, I’d like to look a little deeper into where in our psyche this kind of thinking originates, and what the Gospel of Jesus might say about it … especially in light of today’s readings from Holy Scripture.

Simply put, I believe fear has an extraordinary power in people’s lives, and that Jesus gave us some of the tools to counter that fear. Living in fear gives power to the other who poses a threat … whether the threat be real or imagined. Living in fear obliterates the experience of the present moment and replaces it with a dread of the future. Jesus taught … by both his words and the example of his life and death … that God wants us to live life to its fullest, even in the face of dying. To take seriously what Jesus took seriously means to live a life trusting that there is more to life than just having blood course through our veins. When we react to terrorism with this level of fearful isolationism we lose. We lose not because the terrorists win, but rather because we give a part of our lives away … a part of the life that God gave us to live in its fullest.

Fear in the face of violent terrorist acts is normal … it would be pathological not to be frightened. Fear is part of the “fight or flight” syndrome … we either turn towards the aggressor and return violence for violence, or we avoid the threat by running away or isolating ourselves. This is normal. But fear itself need not control our lives.

To take seriously what Jesus took seriously is to define ourselves as a child of God and trust that our ultimate value comes from that identity. When we allow others to define us we give our true selves away. Being defined by others means that we are allowing what others think of us to become our identity. Being define by others means being defined by our wealth, or the size of our house, or by our status in the community, or by the influence we can exercise, or the number of toys we can collect. On the other hand, a self-differentiated person is define by their own values. They may take into consideration what others may think about them, but they are not defined by them. And Jesus was the epitome of a self-differentiated person … knowing that he was unconditionally loved by God allowed him to not be defined by what other thought of him … even as they led him to the cross.

This is our last Sunday of the long season after the Feast of Pentecost which was way back in May. It is the end of our liturgical year. Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent as we start our countdown to Christmas. And today is also Christ the King Sunday. But what, exactly, is Jesus the Christ the king of?

In John’s gospel we hear Pilate asking Jesus just that question. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked Jesus. After a little bit of verbal parrying Jesus responds, “My kingdom is not of this world.” At this Pilate says, “So you are a king!”

Obviously Pilate is talking about kingship in the political and economic world, and Jesus is talking about kingship in the spiritual world … the world as it would be if we lived in God’s realm. But Pilate just doesn’t get it. Pilate’s world view is about power, wealth, privilege, and conquest. Pilate is obviously a person define by his society and culture. On the other hand, Jesus spent his life and ministry announcing and embodying what life would be like on earth, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. You heard me say it before … and it won’t be the last time … Jesus turned the world upside down. The political, economic, and social subversions were almost endless … peace-making instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation, sacrifice rather than repression, mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed, humility rather than pride, embrace rather than exclusion.

Pilate was threatened by Jesus because he did not … he could not … understand what Jesus was talking about. Pilate was defending the king he knew … Caesar. And he was defending his way of life … Pilate was defending his role in patronage system where he served at the behest of Caesar above him, and he had people indebted to him for their jobs serving below him. To Pilate, Jesus was just another rabble-rousing insurgent defying the occupying rule of Rome. To Jesus, Pilate represented the way the world worked under human rule … being defined by others and world around him … and Jesus was proclaiming a world where God might rule.

If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously than we would seek to live God’s realm in the here and now … in our life in the world as best the world will let us; in our personal lives, as best those around us will let us; and in our internal lives, as best our egos will let us. We would be working for peace … in the world, in our families, within ourselves. We would be working for liberation, sacrifice, mercy, and care for those in need and displaced. We would exercise generosity, humility, and we would embrace the disenfranchised. In other words, we would treat others the way we want to be treated. Rather than living in a fear that robs us of life in the here and now we would … and we can … live in a world where we know ourselves as beloved children of a loving and caring God.

I want to be clear that I’m not proposing some naïve unconcern for the horrible things that can happen to us in this world. Yes, we need to be careful. We should buckle our seatbelts. We should eat the right foods. We should see the doctor on a regular basis. But I am saying that we should not let some hypothetical fear of a future event rule our lives … individually and corporately.

As many of you know I was one of the participants in this past Thursday’s Interfaith Service of Gratitude at San Sebastian Catholic Church. Jane Mahoney, who is Buddhist, and I traded quotes from the Buddha and from Jesus. As I said then, I believe that these two men were drawing from the same universal well of spirit and wisdom. And they are not alone … there have been others who have drawn from that well. Some of the quotes that Jane and I shared struck me as I was preparing this sermon:

Jesus said: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The Buddha said: “Seek for others the happiness you desire for yourself”.

Jesus said: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

The Buddha said: “Hatred can never be appeased by hatred. It can only be appeased by love!”

Jesus said: “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

The Buddha said: “May fear and dread not conquer me.”

I know it is an over simplification, but Buddhism is about just one thing … living in the present moment. Let go of the regrets, the “what if’s,” and the guilt you have from the past … all they do is rob you of the here and now. Give up your worry about the future … it steals the joy of the moment you have in the present. The idea is to live in this moment … don’t let the past of the future take that away from you.

Jesus said much the same thing. Forgiveness is all about letting go of the past so one can live now. And “consider the lilies of the field” … if they can be so joy-provoking why should we let fear take that away from us. When we understand in our hearts and souls and deep in our spirit that we are beloved children of God … loved unconditionally … then we can put away the fears that constrain life … our and others … and we can be open to “welcoming the stranger.”

Listen to Jesus’s words, “My kingdom is not of this world.” It occupies the same space, it involves the same people, but Jesus’ kingdom sees the world through a different lens. Instead of a world view of power, wealth, privilege, and conquest … a world where our value as human beings is defined by nationality, or religious labels, or the size of our weapons … the lens that God looks through sees us all as beloved children who are loved unconditionally … and as beloved children we are called to express that same love to others … including the stranger. It is through the lens of peace-making, liberation, sacrifice, mercy, care for the vulnerable, generosity, humility, and embrace of all of God’s children that we personify what taking seriously what Jesus took seriously really means. It is a world view of treating others in the ways that we would like to be treated.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” Jesus

Amen.