



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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High Stakes

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 28, 2013

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Based on John 13:31-35

The longer I live, the more fully I understand that justice and retribution are much bigger sellers than mercy and forgiveness. In the United States a full 77% of us still claim to be Christians. Whatever else that means, some portion of its meaning must include the notion that we adhere, at least in the broadest ways, to what we believe Jesus said and taught. "Love your enemies," "turn the other cheek," and from today's gospel, "as I have loved you, love one another" come to mind, each one an exacting precept that we believe Jesus really taught.

Two weeks ago tomorrow afternoon a couple of brothers in the name of radical Islam committed an egregious act in Boston. They killed three people that afternoon and injured seriously a number of others, whose lives will never be the same. Later in the week they shot and killed a young police officer at MIT. It was a spree of violence and destruction of the vilest kind of hate crime, unbridled hate, undifferentiated at all, the respecter of no person—no matter how young or old, gentle or harsh, rich or poor. Our sad post-9/11 awareness that terrorism is real and alive here at home notwithstanding, we were stunned, disbelieving in some ways that it had happened.

The smoke from the explosions had not cleared before two radically different voices began to be heard. One set of voices spoke loudly for love and the other just as vocally for hate. We watched as ordinary people took heroic actions in helping those who had been injured. Within a very short amount of time, a spreadsheet on Google had gone viral with nearly 6,000 Bostonians offering their homes for marathon visitors who might be without a place to stay. The daily online version of *Boston Magazine* reported that the offers were made with notations like, "LGBT friendly," "Chinese and Japanese speaker available," and "stay as long as you need." Extraordinary.

And a bit later in the public discourse we were reacquainted with Mr. Rogers. Remember him? Of course, many of us do. He was a television character—and a minister, a fact most of us learned only late in his career. But he wasn't like most television preachers; any doctrinaire leanings he had were private and vastly overshadowed by his commitment to teaching a particular ethic for living. On one of the social media outlets following the bombing, one of his endearing quotes found a new audience. Listen to his simple, comforting words again: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,'" he wrote, "I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world." There were lots of helpers on April 15th near the finish line of the marathon, and thanks be to God for them.

Sadly, though not terribly surprising, another kind of voice was also quickly heard in our response to this act of terrorism: one fueled by hate. Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, announced that they would attend the funeral of Krystle Campbell, one of the bombing victims. You know this group: They blame everything in the world on gay people and our society's acceptance of them, claiming that the Boston bombing was God's judgment for Massachusetts' early passage of marriage equality. But a voice for love—not always what the Teamsters have been known for—responded even more vociferously. Teamsters in the area organized a human shield of 350 members of the Local 25 to circle the family of this young woman, so that they wouldn't be exposed to such virulence should the protestors materialize at her funeral. Just the offer of the action was enough to keep the Westboro pilgrims away.

This group is the extreme, of course; and though often quite vocal and notorious for their shocking vitriol, they are in fact quite small and not truly significant. In fact, it is not they about whom I am most concerned at all, having at my best moments simply relegated them to the loving redemption of God, in need of which all of us stand, and at my worst labeling them hateful whack-jobs whom I choose to ignore. It is a much more mainstream voice that stops me in my tracks: a voice of more nuanced hatred—traced with (if not completely derived from) fear—that creeps into our everyday language about what ought to happen to perpetrators of this and similar violence. Somehow we, who would be followers of Jesus in particular or the way of love in general, have to find a way of talking about monstrous actions without totally dehumanizing the perpetrator. The real crime here is that these two radicals lost any perspective of others—of us—as human beings, freeing them from even the most basic regard for another person and allowing them to assume that their version of righteousness precluded any other consideration.

How we react to these hideous acts of terror is more about us than about the terrorists and is utterly crucial, I believe, to our souls as individuals and to the soul of our beloved nation. Broken hearts are survivable; hardened hearts are usually terminal. I believe—with absolutely no claim of having it all figured out—that we are called to compassion and mercy even in our system for punishing. I think what Jesus meant in all his love talk was that no life is ever to be labeled worthless; somewhere, even in the heart of an un-repenting terrorist, there is a strand of humanity that must be preserved if not by the terrorist him/herself then by the society which governs punishment.

Last week those who attended The Forum were introduced to an Odyssey Networks documentary titled *Serving Life*. It is a riveting account of life in the infamous prison in Angola, Louisiana. It chronicles the last days of a group of criminals, all convicted of heinous crimes and serving life sentences as almost all the prisoners at Angola are. These, however, are dying from terminal illnesses and are being ministered to by willing prison-mates, who serve in essence as hospice chaplains. The overriding observation for me, particularly in thinking about the Boston bombers, is that no one in the documentary is claiming innocence for the dying men or suggesting that their incarceration is unfair, an argument which given the racial mix of the prison population could probably be made. But it is not. The profoundly simple claim instead is that each deserves to die with as little pain and as much dignity as possible, no matter how egregiously he may have sinned. The showing of the documentary clip could not have come at a better time for me, standing, as I was and am, in need of being reminded that humanity lingers in the hardest of hearts and that our refusal to see it diminishes our own claim to it, and when unchecked, exists at our peril.

At our baptism we vow that we shall *with God's help* seek and serve Christ in all others, loving our neighbor as our self. I am not suggesting that we spend hours nationally talking about a troubled, misled 19-year-old or his older but equally and probably more twisted brother. But I am suggesting that, as people of faith, we need to be conscious of our language, particularly when hate disguised as righteous anger creeps into it. I pray that we shall not succumb to the desire for revenge, remaining instead unalterably committed to fair and just punishment, treatment that contains at least the possibility for rehabilitation, whether or not this young man ever sees the light of freedom again, or whether we believe redemption for him is even possible. The stakes are immense for him and for us. Our own humanity—let alone our own faith—may hang in the balance.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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