

Proper 15 Year C 2025

Many of you will remember when the vestry of All Saints voted unanimously to hang a Black Lives Matter banner on our front doors facing Government Street. Our doing so was in response to the murder of George Floyd, a Black man killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis in May of 2020. Needless to say, it got lots of attention, not just in Mobile, but statewide... some very positive... and... some very negative. Even a neighboring Episcopalian was so out done that he called the bishop to tattle. On the other hand, the Black Community of Mobile was most grateful for the support and the solidarity from a predominantly white church standing against the pervasive problem of police brutality upon Black men.

I was interviewed by a local television station a week or so after we hung the banner. The reporter introduced me, and then asked me a question: "So, Reverend Flowers, you are the pastor of a progressive church?" I hesitated; then I answered: "That's an unfortunate label. We are a church that follows, as best we can, the Gospel of Jesus Christ." We are a Gospel church. 'Progressive' just doesn't cover who we are. He moved on. That brief segment didn't make it onto the air.

Just this past week I saw an essay posted on Facebook, written by the principal theology professor at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. Dr. Anthony Baker has published a half dozen books over the past fifteen years. He began his tenure at the seminary after I graduated. He is well liked there; good guy. His essay was published in

The Living Church, a monthly periodical with ties to the Episcopal Church. His essay was about the Reform Church in Germany at the time of Nazi occupation. There were a group of clergy that signed a statement that they would not acquiesce to the authority and propaganda of the Nazis. Dr. Baker argued that, though there are horrific policies being perpetrated by the present administration, the church in the United States is not under the same duress as was the church in Nazi Germany. He believes that we still have our autonomy, unlike the reform Church in Germany, which was under intense pressure to support the Nazi regime. He qualified his premise by saying the Church in the U.S. has its autonomy... so far. Apparently there are some clerics around the country who feel we need to do the same as the clergy of Nazi Germany. It was an interesting essay; some important history; how the church coped with the Nazis. But the church in Germany didn't choose the path of resistance; instead, they chose to be set apart from the calamity of their common life; an autonomous sphere outside the matters of state. His proposed solution for us, in the meantime, is that, as he put it, the so-called progressive pastors, of progressive churches need to be careful.... Be careful not to alienate conservative Christians. In other words, don't make waves; stay under the radar. Mind your own business. Stay aloof from politics.

So there are the words again, "Progressive Christian." I mean, in the contemporary definition of the word, is there any other kind? So I will say it again, progressive is a redundant description. In fact, the use of the term implies that there are

two brands, two faiths, or two parties within the church.... One progressive/liberal, and one conservative. And our call is to just get along. In the present zeitgeist those labels, liberal and conservative, have effectively lost their meaning. I would say our deep divisions have very little to do with liberal or conservative; our divisions are between truth and falsehood. The point I want to make, brothers and sisters, is that there is only one Gospel upon which the four Gospel writers agree. We are to welcome the immigrant and the outcast; we are to tend to the sick, and the poor; we are to feed the hungry; we are to raise up the disenfranchised of our world; we are to work towards creating a community of equals, a community in which wealth is shared justly; we are to call out the inequities of the systems of government that alienate and demean the powerless. Back in the day, political pundits in our culture would call such an ethos liberal; like liberty; like liberation.... I call it Gospel. I hear all the time people in Mobile calling us that liberal church, the gay church, the political church.... No, we are a church that serves the Gospel of Christ... a church in which all are welcome as equals, and we unabashedly practice the Gospel in our public lives... anything less is hypocrisy.

Throughout Luke's Gospel Jesus has been warned to keep his mouth shut. Don't poke the bear, the Temple and Synagogue leadership say. It's best not to speak out. In our passage this morning Jesus's frustration brims over. His ministry is not about keeping the peace for the sake of the comfort of the status quo. His ministry is to call people to the truth. And the way of Jesus, the way of the truth, is so very narrow. It has

no room for labels. His teachings compel us and all who have ears to hear, to live lives of sacrifice for the good of the whole, in particular the ones left out of the social, economic and political system. The modern church has insisted on a belief system as the means to get to heaven in the next life. Just believe in Jesus. I don't know what that means. But Jesus isn't teaching a belief system; he is prescribing a practice whereby communities may live in the heart of God... here and now; and to live in the heart of God is to live in dignity, in well-being, sharing the abundance of this earth. That is what salvation means. Salvation is a social, economic, and political reality. The so-called kingdom of heaven is about the well-being and dignity of all people. Our practice is prophecy, not polite expediency.

Jesus's ministry was first and foremost a witness to the truth; the truth of who we are, humans made in God's image; and the truth of how we are to live. We all know the truth. We are born knowing the truth. Jesus likens it to the scorching south wind. When it blows, it will be hot. We know the truth. The truth is in our DNA. And the truth is costly. To stand for the truth will cause enmity between those who choose to follow it, and those who choose to reject it. Jesus explains this dynamic in dramatic fashion: Serving the Truth will pit friend against friend, family against family. Like a consuming fire, the Truth will destroy and purify. There's no middle ground. Indeed we see this profound dichotomy in our culture today; in politics, in our institutions, in the church, in our families. Our media, and the talking heads of the world, including many theologians,

actually believe that there is a Christian Right, and a Christian left; a supreme false equivalency. The so-called Christian Right supports the deportation of immigrants; they support cutting vital medical care, and food for the poor; they support the dissolution of foreign aid from the wealth of this country meant to help the less fortunate around the world. People will die because of it. That's not Christian. There is only one Gospel, and it is characterized by justice and generosity; empathy and welcome. Since when did cruelty become a virtue? ...and yet a vast many of our nation support and affirm the present administration's war on the poor, and people of color... and its war against justice and decency itself, only to enrich the already enriched. To serve the Gospel is a choice for the truth. And Truth is not a matter of opinion. The Truth is the truth. And truth is our mission.

There is a hymn in the church that says, "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult." But Jesus calls us into the tumult. Our faith is not an escape from the world; our faith calls us into intimate engagement with our world. Jesus teaches us how we may do that. We sacrifice; we feed; we do justice; we welcome; we practice generosity; we dignify; we speak and serve the truth... We Love. This way of God, this path less travelled by, is for our choosing.... Choose the fire, good people... choose the Truth... choose Love. If by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, if by living generous and empathetic lives we are called "liberal, or political, or activist, or progressive,"Then so be it. I call it the Gospel Truth.