

PEOPLE WHO ARE CALLED OUT

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis on November 13, 2016

Pentecost 26C 2016

Luke 21: 5-19

“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” That’s what Jesus says to people who were looking around at the Temple and talking about how stunning the architecture was. I’m pretty sure Jesus will never make it as a docent giving tours of the Temple.

You may know that the Second Temple, the magnificent structure, the place of pilgrimage and sacrifice, the place that many believed was where God was most fully present was completely destroyed in the year 70 C.E. So, at first glance this looks like this is a prediction by Jesus that came true.

But I think there is a better, more accurate framework for these words of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke is not a real time account of Jesus’s life and ministry. This gospel was most likely written down around 85 C.E. So, the Roman siege of Jerusalem has already happened, the Temple has come down. Rather than a prediction of coming disaster, I think this story is best seen as a reflection on where God is when the world around us crashes down—and what it means to live the faith in a time of great upheaval.

Could we ever have chosen a more timely reading? There’s not much unity in these United States. Pew Research uncovered an astounding finding: half of all Democrats and half of all Republicans feel *threatened* by people in the other party. There is certainly plenty of division and fear and pain to go around. But there’s something more and I’m not sure how to name it.

Personally, I feel very different than any other election. In my mind, it’s ok to have different policies. That’s what a democracy is all about. It’s even ok to have different goals.

But it is definitely *not* ok to hate people.

For me that is what has come crashing down—The stones at the top have fallen down because it’s happened at the highest level--throughout this campaign the president-elect has spewed hatred—toward anyone who is not white, toward women, toward Muslims, toward immigrants and toward people with disabilities. And now it is clear that we have half a country full of people who either have that same hatred or didn’t consider it important in casting their votes.

The people who have been the targets of that hatred are scared. And those of us who love people who are the targets of that hatred are scared. That may just include almost everyone here. I heard a number of people say that the day after the election was like the day after September 11th. From one minute to the next the world came crashing down—and this time it felt like the enemy was within.

But I’ve also noticed a difference—along with the rawness and pain, there is an openness. There’s a willingness to look in new directions and at things we have overlooked.

It’s what Jesus is doing in the temple. Everyone is ooing and aahing over the beauty of the temple stones and Jesus basically says what you’re noticing, what you’re focusing on is passing.

Just before this conversation, Jesus has noticed something that they had completely overlooked. It’s a very poor widow, putting in her offering. Jesus holds her up as an example of what it means to give

it all—to trust God completely with your life. The monetary value of her offering is insignificant but what it represents in terms of the orientation of her life is magnificent.

This widow is also the incarnation of vulnerability. And Jesus says put your focus there. Don't overlook the vulnerable.

So, in this uncertain time when it seems like the world as we knew it is no longer, I hear *one thing* clearly—even as we hope and prayer for the best, we must keep our focus on the most vulnerable. We must stay alert and keep our eyes on them.

I shared last week that one of the things I had done on my sabbatical was finally put together a story of my mother's childhood in Germany under Hitler. One part of that story took place on November 9, 1938. And it's a story of worlds crashing down.

My mother and her sister woke up to the sound of shattering glass. They ran outside with their father and saw the family who owned the deli across the street watching in horror as Gestapo agents kicked their furniture and all their belongings out the windows of their third story apartment. My mother saw her friend, Irene, clutching her doll as she watched everything come crashing down. One of the Gestapo grabbed the doll from Irene. As her friend began to cry, my mother—who was not quite nine—took the doll from the Gestapo agent and said, "Let her have her doll." The Gestapo snatched the doll back, threw it to the ground and smashed its face. Irene and her family were all herded into a van and taken away.

This was a horror repeated thousands of times across Germany that night, a night that would come to be known as *Kristalnacht* because of all the shattering of glass and lives.

But in the midst of this shattering glass, I think about this image of a little girl standing by her Jewish friend—a little girl the age of Jami and Sarah—not only standing *by* her but standing *up* for her. And it didn't stop there. The family began sheltering Jews—serving as a stop on a kind of Underground Railroad that helped Jews leave Germany. In the midst of chaos and disaster, they focused on the most vulnerable. That's where Jesus is directing us to look now.

I want to shift now and look for a minute at what the destruction of the temple meant for the early church. Clearly, the war and the three year siege caused a lot of suffering for everyone who lived in Jerusalem. But in terms of the functioning of the church, the viability of the church, it was not a devastating blow. And that's because the temple was not essential to the practice of their faith.

Keep in mind that, in the beginning, the first Christians were almost all Jews and most of them were still connected to the temple in some way but they also had their own distinct worship—on a different day—in homes. They came to the temple to teach and to pray but it was not what defined their faith.

The Greek word for the church is *ekklesia*—the ones who are called out. Called out into a new community centered around a holy meal which made it possible for them to know and experience Jesus' presence with them right then and there. They didn't need to go to the temple to be in the presence of God.

So, I'm thinking about how good it is for us to think of ourselves as the *ekklesia*—the people who are called out. Not called out in the contemporary sense of being caught doing something we shouldn't be doing but called out beyond the walls of the sanctuary. It is wonderful and important that we gather here

together. This is a vital time for us and we count on this time together to build us up and sustain us for the rest of the week.

But the world has been shaken up and I think that we are being redirected—We’re being called to be the church in a new way outside of this beautiful sanctuary and supportive community. Jesus says that in this shaken up time, we will be given an opportunity to testify. So, in this time when we might just rather huddle in and enjoy the safety we feel here, we are being called *out*.

We are being called out to our homes and neighborhoods, to our schools and work places and extended families--to be a presence of love in action there. I know many of you are doing that already. But I think it’s easy to lackadaisical about it—I know I have. But this is a moment for each of us to refocus—once we’ve climbed out of the rubble of the beautiful stones that have come down—it’s time to refocus—to redirect our attention to the most vulnerable--to seize this opportunity to testify with our lives that Love is at the center—that God who is Love wants a dignified life for each and every person.

My daughter, May, who is a junior at Wilson High School here in DC, told me that on Tuesday there will be a walkout. Students from Wilson—which is one of the most diverse high schools in the country—racially, culturally, economically—will take the metro to the new Trump Hotel. Their plan is to join hands and encircle the hotel, with the message that they can’t be divided.

Ordinarily, I’m not hugely in favor of missing school. But these are not ordinary times, and these students have been called out of the school. They may be missing class but they may just be teaching us grown-ups a lesson. I hope and pray that their protest is peaceful and that their message of being undivided is clear.

Being called out in this way has its place. But the call by Jesus to come out of the sanctuary—the place that is safe and set apart—is much broader. We are in a visioning process now of working together to discover exactly what that call looks like for us now.

The call by Jesus to be the church—to be the people who are called out to stand *with and for* the most vulnerable—is a much longer haul. It’s not something that is accomplished from one day to the next.

But Jesus promises that “by your endurance you will gain your souls.” Soul is a word that means even more than that which lives after your body dies. Soul means the truest part of who you really are. It’s the very best self. The “you” God created you to be.

So, Jesus calls us out to this work for the long haul. He says it’s risky and demanding—but through this kind of faithful love we will find our true selves. That’s a promise we can believe.

Thanks be to God. Amen.