

THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD

(7/21/19)

Scripture Lessons: Mark 12:28-34

“The first [commandment] is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31)

This morning we are continuing to reflect on the scripture lesson we heard last week. Last week we listened to the version that was recorded by Matthew; this week’s version was recorded by Mark. They are essentially the same.

I find myself troubled by much of what I read in *The Boston Globe* and *Time* magazine, my two sources of information about what is happening in our country and around the world. I recently read about two incidents involving young people that I have had difficulty getting out of my mind (which probably means that I shouldn’t get them out of my mind). One is the high school student in Lawrence who beheaded his friend for a still unknown reason. The second is the high school student in Wrentham who encouraged her boyfriend to commit suicide, who talked him into getting back in his carbon-monoxide-filled vehicle when he began to have doubts about whether he really wanted to die.

I am troubled by the depth and breadth of sociopathy, which is basically a pathological relationship with society. To put it in religious terms, I am troubled by the pervasiveness of human sin, of human evil. We encounter the ontological reality of evil in genocides, in the rise of neo-Nazi and fascist ideology, in a government’s oppression of freedom and denial of human rights. We encounter it or are encountered by it in the racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, misogyny, and anti-Semitism that has been unleashed in our own country. I find it especially troubling when we confront it right here in eastern Massachusetts.

My reading of the news brought to mind the poem “The Second Coming” by William Butler Yeats. Though Yeats wrote this poem while Great Britain, Europe, and the rest of the world was trying to recover from World War I, it is depressing to realize how perfectly it describes what is going on in America and the world today.

Yeats saw social evil as spinning out of control. He believed technology was progressing beyond humankind’s ability to control it. He thought that the rulers of the world were caught up

in imperialism, in creating ever-widening circles of power, and that few dared speak out against them. He was concerned about weapons of mass destruction (and this was long before the creation and use of nuclear weapons).

This poem is essentially a dark Christmas poem. Yeats hints at a day of judgment when Christ, who has lain dormant for twenty centuries, “slouches toward Bethlehem” to be reborn. Yeats predicts that the coming Christ will be darker and more powerful than the little baby in the manger. The Christ of the Second Coming will bring a “new revelation” to a world that desperately needs it. In this sense, the poem articulates an apocalyptic vision.

I have included a copy of the poem along with the Order of Service this morning, and I have attached it at the end of the sermon for anyone who is reading this on-line. Let me just read aloud the first section, the part where Yeats describes the problem.

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

As we discussed in our study group this past Tuesday, when we read the poem, this is exactly what is happening in our nation and in the world today. Especially the last two lines, as evidenced in the blatant racism that found expression in a recent North Carolina political rally

How do we deal with the stark realities of life that press upon us daily? The young people at the college where I taught realize that they do not live in a safe, predictable world. This has an affect on them. When I asked the students in one of my classes about their level of anxiety, 80% admitted to having an identifiable anxiety disorder. Approximately 40% have genuine panic attacks; 25% have generalized anxiety disorder, which means they worry about a lot of things, that they worry a lot; 5% suffer from specific phobias; and 10% have obsessive-compulsive traits that are serious enough to disrupt their life or studies to some extent.

Our young people experience anxiety in relation to the stark realities of life in the twenty-first century: the impending doom of climate change; the soul-crushing inequity in both income and accumulated wealth; the lack of access by millions of people in our country to health care;

the trillions of dollars of student debt that burdens our young people and renders them unable to purchase a house or establish the standard of living that they should be enjoying based on their education and training; the threat to job security that is posed by robotics, outsourcing, and shifting world markets; the epidemic of addiction to opioid drugs and the staggering number of deaths (or perhaps suicides) that are attributable to opioids and fentanyl; the titans of big pharma who have made billions of dollars through clever marketing that has led to people becoming addicted to their product; the prospect of becoming involved in yet another war in the Middle East; the knowledge that the war on terror is far from over, that sooner or later we will again be attacked; and the threat of global pandemics. When we adults add our concerns about our physical and cognitive health, financial insecurity, changes to Social Security and Medicare, and the loss of loved ones, we realize that we all carry a significant layer of reality-based anxiety.

Is it any wonder that we become inured to what is happening in our nation and in the world? Is it any wonder that we turn off the television at 11 o'clock and cancel our subscription to the newspaper? Is it any wonder that we self-medicate the anxiety that arises from feeling helpless and hopeless in relation to the future? We are not sure we can create a better future for ourselves, let alone for our children and grandchildren. Thank goodness for our women's soccer team, who served as a brief distraction and helped us to feel good about ourselves again!

It may be an oversimplification, but there seems to be a pervasive loss of a healthy center in people's lives. It also may be an oversimplification, but I believe the answer to this loss lies in what Jesus, in his teaching, identifies as the two great commandments.

I believe there is a relationship between the loss of a healthy center, more specifically a transcendental center, and the power of evil that can take possession of individuals, our nation, and the world. I believe there is a relationship between the loss of a healthy center, more specifically a transcendental center, and the anxiety and/or depression that arise as a symptom of this existential vacuum. As the German theologian Fritz Kunkel has said,

Anxiety is a subjective experience that comes from the substitution of a sham center, the ego, in place of our real center, the Self. It is the substitution of this ego in place of our positive relationship to God.

Kunkel believes that the center of our life, our identity, and the source of our meaning in life should be God. It should be grounded in our relationship with God. When we consciously or unconsciously place anything or anyone else in this center, including ourselves (which used to

be called idolatry), we lose our true center. Anxiety then arises in response to the unconscious awareness that we are living our life off center. Seen in this light, anxiety is a helpful symptom, psyche's attempt to make us aware that the core of our personality, the core of our identity is somewhere other than where it should be. It is a signal that we need to return to our true Center.

If our lives were grounded in God, we would not be anxious about the future. This is because we would realize that although we do need to be responsible in our response to social problems, we do not need to control the results. Whether God has a specific plan for each of us and for the world (and I'm not sure God does), the future is in God's hands. What *is* in our hands is the present. This is our only reality. This is what is entrusted to us. We need to have faith that if we do the very best job we can with the present, the future will take care of itself.

We need to find our center in God, not in ourselves or other people. We need to live in the present, to make the most of what is entrusted to us in the present, no matter what it is. If we can do this, we may have a hard or difficult life, but it will not be an anxiety-ridden life.

I find no evidence in the gospels that Jesus experienced anxiety. He was not anxious when people hated him, falsely accused him, and even wanted to kill him. Jesus was not anxious because he had his center, his grounding in God. Pilate and Herod might not like him. His own disciples might not understand or support him; they might even desert or betray him. But he was not anxious. He accepted his enemies, his antagonists, as they were. He just went on about his business, which happened to be the business to which he had been called by God.

When it comes to crimes like the beheading of a classmate or encouraging someone to take his/her life, we are both puzzled and frightened. We are puzzled because we do not know why anyone would do this, why anyone would *want* to do this. We are frightened when we realize that the potential for this kind of evil exists within each and every one of us.

I would suggest that these young people, who appear to be without conscience or remorse, have either lost their center or never had one. The absence of a center in the form of a healthy religious faith has created a vacuum in the soul. This made them vulnerable to the presence and the power of evil, a presence and power that may have taken root because of various factors in their life. When dark thoughts arose, there was nothing there to counter or contain them.

A sociopath, a psychopath, a person without a conscience is a very dangerous person. There is no moral compass to do battle with the dark forces that can rise up from within. A person without a healthy religious faith is vulnerable to these demonic forces. The person cannot find the resources in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit to set his/her life on a right path. There is no inner relationship, no connection to the transcendent. In the words of Yeats, because the gyroscope that would point us to “true north” is just not working, the gyre is spinning further and further away from the center, more and more out of control.

This October we will be celebrating the Sacrament of Infant Baptism. It is a difficult time to bring up a child. I believe it is more difficult, more challenging, more fraught with danger than it was in previous generations. I also believe that a religious education, the kind of deep inner shaping that comes when one is an integral member of a healthy, inclusive religious community is of inestimable value in shaping the soul, in shaping the personality, the values, and the ultimate destiny of a child. It is at times like these that I am glad that our little church is here as a resource both for the child and his parents.

I worry about our young people. Because of the recent scandals in the church, which have caused them to lose faith in organized religion, many have no sense of the transcendent in their lives. Many of them also feel disconnected from society and from a meaningful future. They don't care if they go to jail; they don't even care if they die. They have no moral compass. They act out in destructive ways with no feeling of compunction, compassion, or remorse.

It seems to me that the only viable solution to this problem is to reestablish the center that has become lost. We need to rediscover God and build our lives around this relationship. I know it sounds hokey, but we need to let Jesus into our lives. We need to take on his heart and mind, letting him guide us in all we think, feel, say, and do. We need to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we need to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the antidote not only for the lurking presence of evil, but also for the kind of anxiety that keeps us from living our lives as fully as God would have us live them.

I am troubled by the large percentage of young people who are sitting at home this morning in front of their computer or video game who never receive the kind of religious education that would make them aware of their true center and help them build a relationship with it. The church, the synagogue, the temple, the mosque is important for us as individuals and

for our society. I only hope that more of our young people will come to know what those of us here this morning already know, will come to discover the Centre that we know and which we seek to strengthen in our worship every week.

I don't disagree with what Yeats says about the problems of his time and ours. However, I believe that the Second Coming will occur not in Bethlehem, but in our hearts.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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*The Second Coming
by William Butler Yeats*

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*