

Sacred Activism

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Sunday, January 27, 2019

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10/ Luke 4:14-21

A few days ago, two members of our congregation dropped by my office to talk about their hopes and dreams for this church. Their visit made my day, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about them, their ideas, and their words.

What made the visit so meaningful was the fact that these two members are high school students. I was so impressed by their values and their dreams for FPCNC. Their parents are to be commended, of course, but one of them was very explicit that who she is and the values she holds are a credit to this place.



They suggested that one of the ways we can help build a unique youth program is to mobilize them for social activism. Specifically, they mentioned working to save the environment and that we, perhaps, could have gone to the recent Women's March.

This week, an adult in the congregation suggested we might become a "sanctuary church," giving refuge to undocumented residents who are facing deportation.

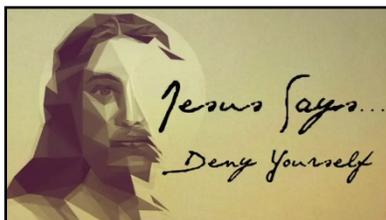
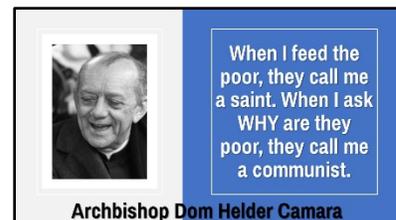
After the amazing interfaith service on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, which a couple of our members worked very hard on, people talked about how a church from which the pastor and some members marched in Selma should re-engage the fight for equality today.



These are specific examples of what makes me proud to be a part of this faith community, and I think these are the kinds of things that can give our church a unique, compelling, and attractive future, one that is as courageous as our past.

The challenge, of course, is that, in today's bifurcated culture, doing this work and even advocating for these values can be labeled disdainfully as "political," as though justice for the poor and relief for the oppressed are values of one political party or candidate, rather than the values of God.

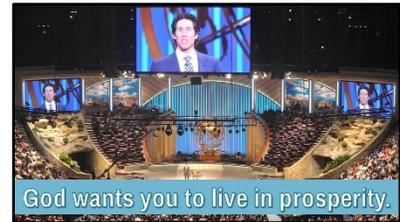
Today, Christians avoid conversations about economic justice. We want our faith to make us feel good, so we reserve our activism for us, the haves, caring for them, the have-nots, never asking why, in the richest nation in human history, there still are so many have-nots and why so many of them are people of color.



Now, before you get upset with me, let me respectfully ask you to take it up with Jesus. I mean, did you hear the message in his first sermon, preached in his hometown synagogue?

In next week's Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus' hometown congregation responded to his sermon by trying to throw him off a cliff. I keep wondering what exactly it was that upset them so ...

- Was it his focus on helping the poor find some good in life? Perhaps they expected his sermon to focus on making them feel better. It works in some churches.
- Maybe they thought he was being too lenient on criminals because he wanted to release the captives.
- Perhaps they took his remarks about caring for the blind as suggesting that everyone deserves health care.
- They no doubt thought his words about fighting oppression were too radical for their little synagogue.



Jesus said these were the things the Spirit had anointed him to do, and dare I suggest that these also are the kinds of things the Spirit seeks to anoint the church, the Body of Christ, to do.

Sacred activism is nothing new. It dates back to the inaugural sermon of Jesus, in which he announced his agenda for his life and ministry, his core values, his vision, his mission.

As I am using it today, the term "sacred activism" was coined by Andrew Harvey, who is the founder and director of the "Institute of Sacred Activism." He wrote:

A spirituality that is only private and self-absorbed, devoid of an authentic political and social consciousness, does little to halt the suicidal juggernaut of history. On the other hand, an activism that is not purified by

profound spiritual self-awareness and rooted in divine truth, and compassion will only perpetuate the problems it is trying to solve. However, when the deepest and most grounded spiritual vision is married to a pragmatic drive to transform existing political, economic, institutions, a holy force, love in action - is born. This force I define as Sacred Activism.

In the first lesson this morning, we heard a snippet of the ancient story of how the Hebrews returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. Nehemiah is largely credited with organizing the rebuilding effort, but this passage notes that it was Ezra the priest who motivated the people by rooting their work in their scriptures and faith traditions.

That is what distinguishes us from social service agencies or political action groups. Regardless of party or candidate, what we work for is not an expression of our politics; it is an expression of our faith. We are following the model of Jesus who, even in his hometown synagogue, courageously advocated for the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the oppressed. We don't do it because it is politically correct; we do it because Jesus did and because it is biblically correct.

For the ancient Jews who were taking back their home, the task before them was so overwhelming they didn't know where to begin. They might have been immobilized, even depressed, by the daunting challenge, but Nehemiah knew this was a formula for failure. Nehemiah says, "Do not be discouraged for the joy of the Lord is your strength."



The joy
of the
Lord is my
strength.

One of the great gifts from the visit of those two young women in our congregation was the reminder that the future is in good hands, in the hands of people who are not afraid to be sacred activists in the mold of Jesus.

That awareness gives me great joy and strength. Perhaps that was what Jesus meant when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to"

So, as members of the Body of Christ today, what has the Spirit of God anointed us to do?

Next week, at the end of the Vision Summit, we will consecrate the Vision Team and ask God to anoint them to help us discern what we as a church have been anointed to do. I just want us to remember, as a friend of mine loved to say, "God doesn't equip great ships for mud puddles."

If we want to claim the anointing of God for the future, we must open the windows of our souls and let the Spirit blow through, stirring new visions and fresh dreams. We must not respond from a place of fear and scarcity, but with confidence that, if God has called us to do something great, then God will provide the resources and people we need.

If all we are planning to do, however, is sail boldly across a mud puddle, we don't need God for that.

Brian Willson served willingly in the war in Vietnam, but later came to regret the things he did while there. After much soul searching, he decided to do what he could to make sure his country never again got involved in a war like that.

One day, while traveling in Central America, he realized that we were doing the same thing in someone else's country. Instead of sending troops, we were sending money and weapons to make sure "our side" won. Brian Willson resolved to do all he could to tell people how wrong it was for us to use our power and wealth to perpetuate war. Willson participated in a protest outside

the Concord Naval Weapons Station from which munitions were being shipped to Central America.



The protesters spread across the train track that brought the weapons into the base. They fully expected to be arrested, but, instead, the engineer accelerated the train, and Brian Willson awoke in a hospital ICU without either of his legs.

No one would have blamed him if he had become bitter, but, instead, he became one of the most effective peace activists in the country. Willson said:



You know, although I miss my legs, I do not regret my choice. I think I did what I always thought the German people ought to have done as the trains took people off to extermination camps.

Today, I want to invite you to channel the sacred activism of Jesus. Get in the way. Get in the way of injustice. Get in the way of poverty. Get in the way of oppression. Get in the way of the things for which Jesus gave his life fighting.

When we hold the values of Jesus so tightly that we feel anointed **do something**, we, too, become sacred activists.