

“Stay Woke”
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Andrew Foster Connors
24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 19, 2017

It's stewardship Sunday and there's a big part of me that wishes we could do stewardship commitment like we've sometimes done it in the past – celebrating the resurrection of this community, back from near death, a nearly 40 year resurrection story in its own right. Proof that God isn't finished with us yet.

But I think our celebration would be out of place or at least premature, not with the violence in our city completely out of control. The truth is that none of our efforts to build this church are going to make a bit of difference if we don't get a handle on the craziness that is going around. Lifelong residents are telling us they've never seen it this bad and some of those who have loved this city the most are talking about moving out. School budgets are based on enrollment which continues to slide creating an infinite loop of budget cuts followed by departures of families who exercise other options, followed by more budget cuts. Some people from the counties – not as city-wise as some of us (I know) – are not coming into the city to spend their money. A rabbi shared with me the story of one couple in his congregation that was about to sell their home in the county and move downtown for a city retirement. They've decided to call it off. A priest from Ethiopia said “Where I'm from in Africa we are all very poor. We have nothing. But we do not kill each other. Here I am afraid.” Less than 20% of police officers are willing to live in the city. Businesses and colleges complain about losing top talent to other places.

Stewardship Sunday or not, to celebrate our internal success at this moment in history would be like celebrating a successful concert on the deck of the Titanic. If we can't right the ship, we're all going down.

Now I know that some of the city folk among us – your attitude can be – “well stay home in your county suburbia. We don't need you anyway.” I've always loved the spirit behind that attitude especially in Baltimore. Get gritty or get out. John Waters once suggested that the city ought to change its motto to “Come to Baltimore and be shocked.” If you don't like it, move to DC or NY. “Baltimore. . .actually, I like it.”

But it can get a lot worse than it is or has ever been, and that's saying something. New York, a city of 8.5 million people has had 250 murders this year. Baltimore, a city of less than 620,000 has had 309. I know a grandmother who sometimes holds her granddaughter in one arm and her shotgun in the other. I know children who speak of the murder of a parent as if it's part of normal living. Meanwhile, at precisely the time when the city needs the church, many are crumbling from the inside: churches closing and merging, buildings crumbling from deferred maintenance too costly to undertake, and a generation of young people who have decided they can be spiritual just fine without the church.

I say, the city *needs the church* – not because people can't be spiritual without it. You can pray, and study, and meditate without the church. The city needs the

church because it's one of the only institutions left that can stand between ordinary people and the rapacious forces of the market that want to quantify and consume everything but can never create community or cultivate neighborly values; it is one of the only institutions left that can take people's hopes and dreams and organize them to cut through political stalemates; and it is one of the only institutions who has some answers to the violence at precisely the time when many of our city leaders frankly don't know what to do.

On commitment Sunday I think I'm supposed to celebrate our strength and God knows we have much for which to be grateful – we can afford a fulltime pastor. We can afford music that speaks closer to the truth of our faith than mere words. We have talent that runs through this church like the Jones Falls runs through the city – teaching and organizing and praying and worshiping and educating and connecting. And we have children – hallelujah, thank you Jesus. We are one of the strongest churches in this city at this moment in our history and yet we are probably 20-40 members away from death at any moment. If we don't get a handle on this violence now we won't last. We may as well close up shop right now. Declare defeat.

But it's more than that to me. If the church isn't addressing the violence in our time, the church doesn't deserve to survive. We may as well declare that Jesus Christ isn't raised from the dead, death is stronger than life, hate is stronger than love, church is irrelevant. Then go home. And see how long any of us can last trying to raise our children not to fear strangers, on our own. Trying to raise our children to believe that God is more than the rote memorization of things said by dead theologians, on our own. Try teaching them that the church really is more than a social club, on our own. Let them sit home and create community online where it's safe, away from face to face encounters of people you can't block on instagram.

I have despaired over the violence in our city. Too many Rachels weeping for their children. Too many children having to fend for themselves on streets of ruin. Too much trauma for any one city to absorb.

The church, of course, was born into a time of violence. The Roman Empire preached that the only way to achieve the peace was through controlled violence, clear hierarchies, wars to stop resistance of every kind. "That's the way the world works," that Empire preached and practiced. And this little bitty group of Jews came along, led by a crazy no-name rabbi from Nazareth and said not true. The only way to salvation – that's to wholeness - is by rejecting violence, embracing your neighbors, sharing your resources.

It was a compelling message until people started dying, Jesus didn't show up to overthrow the Roman system, the kingdom that he promised seemed farther out of reach. People inside the church were starting to question whether they should jump ship – move from the losing team back to what seemed to work.

It's the place where we find ourselves in the city. Good people ready to embrace the politics of Rome because they don't know what else to do. Law and order, throw 'em the book, treat children as adults, so some of us can get a bit of peace and security. Pax Romana. Long live Caesar.

Into that world, Paul writes to this little church. A minority group. A small community. And he says, *snap out of it. Keep awake, people. Stay woke.* I know

that's a popular twitter hashtag, but it's right here in the text. The day of the LORD will come like a thief in the night so "let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober." Put on the breastplate of faith and love, because in the battle we're in that's the only weapon that will win. Put on the helmet of hope of salvation – being saved - which didn't start out as a religious word.

Keep awake when you hear city leaders and residents across some neighborhoods calling for children to be locked up instead of treated for trauma some have lived with like soldiers who never got to leave their war. Keep awake when you hear law and order policies on the horizon almost to the hour that this country started to confess the Jim Crow cradle to prison pipeline. Keep awake when you hear people giving up on the possibility of good relations with police or giving up on a good education for their children or giving up making two Baltimores one. Keep awake.

Karl Barth defined the entire life of Christian discipleship as people who are continually reawakened – continuous repentance, continuous transformation, continuous renewal.¹ Barth was careful to say that Christians aren't the people who are awake vs. everybody else who's asleep. Christians are those who constantly stand in need of reawakening from the sleep of all kinds of errors and "fantasies and falsehoods." We have to be on guard so we don't fall asleep to what's true, and what's coming to us in Jesus' way of love and peace.

And I know the church doesn't have all the answers to the violence in this moment but we do have some. We know too many shootings and murders happen around liquor stores. Call a state of emergency and shut them down every night at 9pm until we get a handle on the crime. We know that when you ask people about the roots of the violence, the majority of people want to talk first about children – children who have no place to place, children who don't have parents raising them up in the right paths, children who display all the symptoms of trauma exposure yet get none of the treatment. Unleash the social workers, open up all rec centers late. Do it for 90 days and see what happens. We know that every neighborhood complains about police who sit in their vehicles and do nothing but text on their phones. And police –when you ask them – say they don't have clear guidance on what they're supposed to be doing and they don't have enough officers to fill out their shifts. We know this because the church is still the best listener on the block when it wants to be. We know the power that can come when people are listened to. Whenever people cry out, God hears, God is moved, God takes action. God calls on us to do the same.

And if stewardship is about taking care of gifts that don't belong to you in the first place – first and foremost the gift of life – I can't think of anything to make our church more relevant than to step into the breach at this point in the city's life. To come together with people from other churches, and synagogues, and mosques, and ethical societies, and schools to do what is necessary to bring about peace. To make

¹ Thanks to Jennifer McBride's "Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, p. 302-306. McBride quotes Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 554-56, 560, 565, 567.

the private pain of too many grieving mothers public so we can bring the healing that is needed in this time and place.

And maybe if we do, the church budget will take care of itself, there will be enough to pay the staff what you want to pay us, to take care of these treasured buildings, to deepen our faith in the Lord because people will see for themselves – now that’s a church I want to be a part of. One where people can come together and change their future together. One where people’s faith in the possibility of peace actually brings it about. One where religion isn’t only about what happens to you when you die, it’s what gives you the power to actually live. People might say about us, “It’s almost like they leave that church with armor all over them.”²

I’ve said many times before that the church’s future is wrapped up in the city’s future. This congregation decided that long ago. I believe that decision was God’s doing. But now it’s our turn to put on the breastplate of faith and love, to buckle down the helmet of salvation and encourage one another to get in the fight for the hope of salvation – our saving in the hour of our greatest need.

² A vague allusion to Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. Coates admits that while he has no place for God in his life, he has the utmost respect for God-inspired civil rights soldiers who have “armor all over them.” At least, that is my memory of the quote.