

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I haven't been a priest in this parish for that long, and yet, this is the third time I've been called upon to enter the pulpit after a week painted with blood and shattered by violence. Orlando. Istanbul. Now Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Dallas. And I have to tell you, I am running out of words.

How many different ways are there to say that violence is not the will of God? How many clever turns of phrase can highlight the abhorrence our Lord feels when humans trap one another in ancient nets of avarice and prejudice, when people kill and kill and kill, when God's children sacrifice to the false gods of War, of Violence, of Oppression, of Expedience. There are only so many rhetorical tricks, and I am pretty much out.

And, really, what should I be saying to you wonderful people? I know that you are followers of Jesus. I know that you full-throatedly condemn violence in all its forms and systemic racism and xenophobia in all their insidious guises. I know that you individually and we as a community work to root out the things in our lives that are not of God, that are injurious to the children of God.

So, if the priest is almost out of words and the people are already weeping for the world and striving to repair the breaches in God's kingdom, what is left? What comes to us when our spirit is raw and our path is unclear?

I know some beautiful and sainted people who pray every day, first thing in the morning. They read their Psalms, pray the Daily Office in the Prayer Book and are generally faithful in their daily conversations with God.

I am not, nor have I ever been, like those people. Instead, I tend to pray when I am out of better ideas. Which is where I find myself this morning. And so, this week, I am going to pray. I will pray for the repose of the soul of Alton Sterling. I will pray for the repose of the soul of Philando Castile. I will pray for the five men slaughtered in Dallas by a shooter, Brent, Patrick, Michael, Lorne and Michael. I will pray for the shooter, Micah. And I will pray for a way forward for this priest who is running out words and for this parish that is trying so hard to be faithful to the path of Jesus. And I hope that you will pray with me.

And as we pray, we will lean on the promises of God; that when we call, we will be answered. That when we call, something will begin to happen. I predict that the feeling of isolation or of hopelessness will begin to lessen. As we spend some time on our knees in conversation with God, I predict that our sense of ourselves as members of a vast network of concerned people of faith will begin to strengthen. And I predict that, instead of despair, we will begin to feel our power.

In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was addressing a group of civil rights movement members at a church in Memphis. The government of Memphis was coming down pretty hard on the Civil Rights movement, and he was there to restore and strengthen their commitment to the work for justice and to inspire them for the difficult days to come. King told stories of the movement's previous successes in Alabama, hoping to shore up the courage of the people in Memphis, who were being persecuted by the city government and the police. Brother Martin talked about the way people in the successful Alabama movement would leave the Baptist church together, arm in arm, singing hymns while they took to the streets. Singing hymns, even when the dogs were let loose upon them. And he told a story of people praying together while fire hoses were turned on them. Bull Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety in the city of Birmingham ordered actual fire hoses turned on people who were walking in the streets singing and praying. But Dr. King said this, "Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denominations, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water. That couldn't stop us."

And so, good people of St. Mark's, this week we are going to pray. And we are going to remember our Baptisms and be strengthened by that memory. Every day this week, I will open this church up at noon for prayer for an hour, and every day at noon, I will make sure that our Baptismal font is full of water so that anyone who wants to remember his or her Baptism may do so. We will remember that there are some kinds of fire that simply cannot be put out—even when the preacher is running out of words and even when the parishioners are tired or raw or grieving.

We will not underestimate the power of being in conversation with God during these heart-breaking times. And we will not underestimate the power of our connection to every Christian on this planet through the waters of our Baptism.

There are forces in the world who will try to tell us in these weeks to come that some people are separate from us, that some people are different. And we, as people who pray and remember our Baptism, know that for the lie it is. We are one. We are one Body of Christ. When there is hatred or degradation in one part of the Body, we all feel it. We are connected, inalienably, to everyone who has cried this week, everyone who has despaired of ever seeing the reign of God come to fruition.

We know something that the world forgets. We know who our neighbor is. We recognize him when he is broken and bloodied on the side of the road. We know that he is our neighbor even when he doesn't look anything like us, even when his house isn't anywhere near our house, even when our lives don't seem to have much to do with each other. We know who our neighbor is. And we know that we are in him and he is in us--inseparable, brothers and sisters in Christ, brothers and sisters in struggle, brothers and sisters in pain. There are some kinds of fire that simply cannot be put out, no matter how hard the world might try. Remember your prayers. Remember your Baptism. And then the words will become clear. And then the direction will become clear. Amen.