

Faith in the Face of Fear, Love in the Face of Terror
based on Gal. 5:1-4, 13-26 and 2Cor. 6:1-2, David Jahnke, 7/10/16

2 Corinthians 6: 1-2 say, As we work together with Christ, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Today is the day of salvation in America and in our church. Today is the day if we so choose it; if we choose to reject all violent words and deeds in every circumstance! If we no longer justify violent words or deeds because of pain or the faults of others; if we no longer turn a blind eye to prejudice, privilege and injustice; if we no longer accept our own apathy and indifference. Today is the day of salvation if we accept and obey nothing less than Christ’s absolute Laws of Love and Peace and Justice for everyone.

Jesus and Paul call us to an impossible possibility— loving our neighbors as ourselves. Impossible because we don’t do even it very well for our own loved ones in our own homes. How are we going to do that for the alien and the sinful; the black and the Asian; the poor? We must agree with Paul that no one is righteous; the law cannot justify us and only grace can set us free.

And in the midst of the horrors of the last week, it is appropriate to fall back on grace; to find rest in the viewpoint of this Wendell Berry poem which a church member put up on Facebook. The poem is titled The Peace of Wild Things.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound

in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water,
and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light.

For a time, I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.
How beautiful and Paul would not object. But Paul would follow this up by asking us, “If we have been set free by grace, what are we set free for? To avoid

civic responsibility? Or worse, to break the Laws of Love and Peace and Justice? Of course not, that would mean we are enslaved, not free!”

The other day Hailey said to me, “People are able to thrive when there are good systems and rules in place.” Amen. It is when people’s basic needs are met— physical, emotional, spiritual— and the one most responsible for that is themselves but just, caring systems are critical as well; then they can then rest in the saving grace of God without being anxious or guilty or fearful.

And we can create good systems rooted in Christ’s Law of Love. When Jesus told the rich man to sell everything he owned and give it the poor, he could not do it. Jesus loved him anyway. So no matter what I say or what you do, remember that Jesus loves you and God will save you.

But Jesus also told the disciples that what seems impossible for us is possible for God. And if nothing is impossible with God, then we can follow Christ and his Law of Love. Because in Christ, God has written the Laws of His Kingdom on our hearts. God baptizes us with fire and can melt these cold, hard hearts and makes them burn with passion and compassion for the poor people of God; and who isn’t poor when it comes to sin, suffering and death? But some feel it so much more than we do...and we must attend to that truth.

And attention and faithfulness are more a heart thing than a head thing. I am reading a great book by the Christian philosopher James Smith. He says that everyone loves; because we all have hearts and that that is what hearts do. The question is will we love ourselves and the things of the flesh; our false power and security; our materials and luxuries? Or will we love God, his people everywhere and the eternal things of God’s Kingdom? And what we love is matter of formation and habit. So will we let God be the potter and re-form us in new habits and disciplines and practices? Or will we just carry on as usual? Shrugging our shoulders with a ho-hum... What are you gonna do? People don’t change.

No more! Today is the day of salvation! So consider this. “Starting today, *I* will change! I will look daily to Christ Jesus. I will study His teachings and his actions in the gospels. I will commit my spirit to Him regularly in prayer. I will follow his way in the world, despite the cost. In particular, I will listen to the pain of hurting people-- black people, traumatized people, sick people, poor people.

And at the same time, I will respect and support and pray for authorities— police, clergy, teachers, politicians so many more. I will join them in the Spirit’s

movement toward peace among races and religions. Because if I do nothing or next to nothing, I have actually chosen entropy, chaos, and dissolution.

I have been reading a wonderful book called The Boys in the Boat about the 1936 gold-medal pursuing college students from the University of Washington. When they got to the final round, everything seemed against them. The Germans who were hosting the Olympics had persuaded the Olympic committee to add two lanes to the races which meant two teams would be out in rougher water. They also then changed how lanes were assigned so that the Americans ended up in the roughest water despite having the best time in the preliminaries.

Additionally, the wind that day on the lake in Germany was strong and the water choppy. They would be handicapped at least a couple of boats against the other 5 best crews in the world. On top of that, one of their team was very sick and had been for 2-3 weeks. His coach did not want to let him race but he and the other boys demanded it, and begged the coach.

And then there was this. After reaching the starting line but before they realized what was happening, the race had started. So they started the most important race of their lives a couple of seconds and two boats behind. They thought there was no way. But after a furious and incredibly painful race, they managed to cross the finish line barely first for the gold.

Rower Joe Rantz, who grew up in poverty, whose mother died when he was young and who was kicked out of the house by his stepmother when he was 16, recollected the finish this way.

Immediately after the race, even as he sat gasping for air...an expansive sense of calm had enveloped Joe. In the last desperate few hundred meters of the race, in the searing pain and bewildering noise of that final furious sprint, there had come a singular moment when Joe realized with startling clarity that there was nothing more he could do to win the race, beyond what he was already doing. Except for one thing. He could finally abandon all doubt, trust absolutely without reservation that he and the boy in front of him and the boys behind him would all do precisely what they needed to do at precisely the instant they needed to do it. He had known in that instant that there could be no hesitation, no shred of indecision. He had had no choice but to throw himself into each stroke as if he were throwing himself off of a cliff into a void, with unquestioned faith that the others would be there to save him from catching the whole weight of the shell on his blade. And he had done it. Over and over, forty-four times per minute, he had hurled himself blindly into his future, not just believing but knowing that the other boys would be there for him, all of them, moment by precious moment.

In the white-hot emotional furnace of those final meters at Grünau, Joe and the boys had finally forged the prize they had sought all season, the prize Joe had sought nearly all his life. Now he felt whole. He was ready to go home.

The boys in the boat faced what we face-- seemingly insurmountable hurdles. We approach the starting line with elements against us, sickness and injustice plaguing us. We are slow out of the blocks or we jump the gun in practically everything! We see everything wrong in this world and we think there is no way that Love and Justice and Peace win the race.

The Boys in the Boat dug deeper than ever and found a place of complete trust in each other and everything around them. They were one in pain and strength and movement. And they were able to do the seemingly impossible.

This is how it is with God and the church. We persist through the pain. We remember that so many are with and for us. We give ourselves over completely to faith in the sovereign power of God's love working through all peoples and things. And an amazing thing happens. We find the strength to follow Christ's Law of love and peace and prosperity for all.

We go and buy a meal for a hungry homeless beggar. We donate to any number of causes. We think of that lonely acquaintance who is sometimes so difficult but we decide to reach out to them and show them love. We smile at and speak to a new dark-skinned neighbor or colleague or parent at school. We accept a call to more service, like these new officers whom we are about to install.

Our newfound commitments to love are very costly but also very rewarding. Because we receive more from God and others than we give. And when we persevere in love and peace against all odds, we lead our nation to where the Boys in the Boat ended up. We receive the prize we have always longed for—wholeness as individuals, communities and a nation. We were always meant to be one; we will be in the end. So let's realize it here and now. Today is the day of salvation...through the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine...

