

“Can we Wait?” A sermon by Nathan Sobers
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
November 12, 2017 Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 25:1-13

Once again, I find myself in the unenviable position of stepping into the pulpit on the Sunday after a national tragedy. As we all know, last Sunday morning a gunman entered the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas, during morning worship, and took 26 innocent lives. Almost half of the lives lost were children, including the 14-year-old daughter of First Baptist’s pastor. The victims of the worst church shooting in our country’s history, ranged in age from 15 months to 87 years old. In addition to the 26 lives taken, 20 more people were injured.

Once again, we grieve and mourn the loss of life. Once again, we experience the shock, anger, fear and sadness that have become an all too common part of the fabric of our national life, once again, our leaders are quick to offer their thoughts and prayers and once again, religious leaders are stepping into pulpits all across this nation this morning trying to help us make sense out of an event that simply makes no sense.

I don’t believe we have the luxury to bury our heads in the sand when events of this nature occur. I don’t believe, as a preacher, that I’m doing you any favors by limiting the mention of tragedies to the prayers of the people. I don’t believe, as a Christian, that we are called to ignore what happens in the world around us and I don’t believe we are called, as followers of Christ, to wait indefinitely before we put our faith into action.

One of the central themes of our gospel reading today is being prepared to wait. Before I heard about Sutherland Springs, I had written a sermon extolling the virtues of being patient and being prepared to wait, both of which are an absolute necessity for those of us who engage in any type of social justice work. I had written, rather disparagingly, about the 5 bridesmaids who were not prepared to wait and who were shocked when the bridegroom didn’t arrive on their schedule. I wrote about taking a long view in regard to changing the world as it is to the world as it should be. While all of this still holds true, the question that’s been rattling around in my head since last Sunday is this: when does waiting become an excuse not to act?

As Christians, we are taught to trust in God and wait patiently for God to heal us, for God to save us, for God to protect us. So, on the one hand, we are taught that waiting patiently is foundational piece of how we should act as Christians and I agree that waiting and being patient are virtues we all should cultivate. On the other hand, when we pray for God to save us from times of trial, and then take no action, is it possible that we might overlook God’s answer to our prayers?

There’s a story about a man whose town was being flooded by heavy rains. Being a man of faith, he prayed to God to save him. As the waters rose, the search and rescue team from the local sheriff’s office knocked on his door. “Come on”, they told the man, “we have a four- wheel drive truck right here to take you to safety.” The man waved the

search and rescue folks off, telling them that God would save him and he didn't need their help. As the waters continued to rise, the man was forced to climb to the second floor of his house to avoid drowning. As he looked out his window, he saw his neighbors in a row boat, who said to the man "come on, we have a boat right here, ready to take you to safety". The man again waved his would-be rescuers off saying "God will save me, I don't need your help". The neighbors rowed on. Still the waters rose, and the man was forced to climb onto the roof, where a helicopter was hovering overhead. A rope ladder was lowered, and a voice boomed out "grab onto the rope, and we'll haul you up to safety". Once again, the man waved them off saying "I've prayed to God. God will save me". The helicopter flew away and the man slipped off the roof and drowned. When the man was standing before God in heaven, he asked God, "I prayed to you to save me, why did you let me drown"? God's reply? "I sent you a four-wheel drive truck, a boat and a helicopter. What else did you want me to do"?

The moral here is that faith without action is simply not enough. God always answers prayers, but often not in the manner we think they should be answered. Sometimes, we are unprepared to hear the answer to our prayers, if that answer doesn't fit with our preconceived notion of what the answer should be.

What if, when we pray for an end to violence, hatred and intolerance, God answers by telling us to get up and do something? Can we really afford to wait until the answer to our prayers fits with what we think it should be? I've come to understand that God simply doesn't work that way.

If you are as horrified as I am by the events of last Sunday, if you have prayed for an end to the gun violence that plagues our nation, now is not the time to sit back and wait for someone else to act. Working to change the world as it is to the world as it should be, is never easy but it cannot be someone else's job. It is our job. Of course, we offer our thoughts and prayers for those most affected by this most recent tragedy, but thoughts and prayers are not enough.

God does answer our prayers for justice and peace. However, like it or not, the answer is rarely what we want to hear. As people of faith, we must act on God's answer in spite of our fears and misgivings.

Your charge then, sisters and brothers, is this: Pray for peace and justice, knowing that God will answer your prayer. Pray for peace and justice, knowing that the answer you receive may not be the one you want to hear. Be open, sisters and brothers, to acting on God's call to be God's hands and feet in a world weary of violence. Be open to discovering new ways that we, as a community of faith, can work together to move beyond simply offering our thoughts and prayers. Let us put our faith into action, trusting that we, in spite of our fears and misgivings, are part of God's plan to bring into existence the world as it should be.

AMEN