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# In Interesting Times

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

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Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at <http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2017-02-12.mp3>.*

The Rev. Amanda A. Akes  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Sixth Sunday of Epiphany  
February 12, 2017

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9  
Matthew 5:21-37

There is supposedly an old Chinese curse that goes like this: “May you live in interesting times.” We certainly live in interesting times. And these interesting times of ours can sometimes feel a little cursed. More and more, we find ourselves having to confront the question, “How do we live as Christians in these interesting times?”

The answer is simple. We continue to live according to the gospel good news of Jesus Christ. No matter what is happening in our personal lives, no matter what is happening in our nation, or in the world, we seek to live our lives according to the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ. Period. Times change. Circumstances change. Political administrations change. The one unchangeable constant in this world is God. And we know how God would have us live in interesting times and in not so interesting times. We know because we have an example. We have a roadmap, a living, breathing instruction manual – God’s incarnate son, Jesus Christ. He is the visible image of the invisible God. Scripture tells us that Jesus “is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). And Jesus’ message, his teachings and instructions, to those who seek to follow him, are the same today as they were when he delivered them two millennia ago.

Jesus’ message for us today comes from the Gospel of Matthew. This portion of scripture is a discourse of moral teachings that tradition has termed, “The Sermon on the Mount.” This Sunday is the third week in a row that we have listened to a segment of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. This time we hear Jesus eloquently presenting a series of shared understandings of the Law of Moses, only to then contrast them with a renewed way of looking at the matters. He begins these statements with, “You have heard that it was said” and concludes them by saying, “but I say to you”. In this way, Jesus presents the true intent of the law as he understood it.

In the verse immediately preceding the passage for today, Jesus warned his followers that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). Here righteousness means obedience to the will of God from the innermost being, in which actions are rooted in justice and concern for others, not just about fulfilling the outward forms of the law. Jesus instructs his disciples to serve not only the letter of the law, but also its spirit and intention. In each of the examples he gives, Jesus probes beyond the act that was prohibited to identify its root cause, all of which center around human relations. Jesus challenges his followers to a deeper understanding of what it means to serve God through a new way of viewing their relationships with others.

In short, what Jesus is saying is that how we treat one another matters. In our gospel text, Jesus reminds his listeners that life is threatened when anger and insults are constantly prevalent in relationships. Life is threatened when people are objectified, merely for the fulfillment of sexual desire. Life is threatened when covenant relationships are broken. Life is threatened when one does not follow through on the oaths they make. Jesus stresses the negative impact of unresolved

and conflictive human interaction. At the same time, Jesus offers a mechanism for accountability and a path towards mending broken relationships. That path is one of reconciliation.

For real reconciliation to occur, we must not only identify the offense, but also value the relationship that may be jeopardized by the offense. It requires openness of heart to engage in dialogue and to seek the restoration of that particular relationship. Reconciliation is not always plausible or possible. Yet when it is, we are called to seek it and to work for it. God desires for us to live in relationship with one another. When our relationships are broken, other areas of our lives may become off-balance. Broken relationships throw us off kilter, separate us from one another, and they separate us from God.

As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, even in interesting times like ours. Our neighbors are those who think like us, and those who don't. Our neighbors are those who act, sound, and look like us, and those who don't. In interesting times such as ours, a difference of political and ethical opinions has caused a visible divide among neighbors; yes, even among families, friends, and communities. And yet, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever and as Christians, we are called to love, to sow seeds of reconciliation where possible, to build up, to nourish, to forgive, to heal. Though it may not be easy, though it may not be popular, as Christians, we are called to be agents of reconciliation.

I want you to think about what that means for you personally. Perhaps Jesus' message, if you take it seriously, will challenge you to think or act differently. It has challenged me, this very week. Earlier in the week, my wife Sarah and I were watching the news and I had had enough. I couldn't hear about one more confirmation hearing or even bear to look at some of the faces appearing on TV. I ran through a laundry list of complaints about what's happening in our nation and Sarah empathically nodded here and there. Then at the end of my rant, Sarah looked at me and said, "But what are you doing about it?"

I've written and called and marched, but those actions allow me to keep a certain amount of distance from the heart of the matter. I choose who I talk to and who I don't, whose Facebook posts I read, and whose I don't. And I realized that in doing this, I ignore Jesus' gospel mandate of relationship and reconciliation. So a few days later, I called one of my uncles from southeast Florida. Our beliefs and ideologies couldn't be more different than one another and at times, it can be challenging to talk about anything besides the weather. But we did talk, at least for a while. This was the first time we have talked in the past four months. The conversation stayed civil and conventional. There was nothing groundbreaking about our dialogue. But we reestablished channels of communication that, consciously or unconsciously, we had broken. I'm not delusional. I know that one call isn't going to make things right in the world, but for my uncle and me a door has been cracked open. There is a sliver of light shining through. And in interesting times such as these, that feels like a good move, like a step in the right direction. It's not a big step, but it is a step towards relationship, towards reconciliation. Jesus' words, his message, challenge me to live life more intentionally and to be better. He challenges us all to be better. In interesting times such as these, may we rise to the occasion in ways that are pleasing to him, in ways that manifest his life and teachings. Amen.