

Prayer Vigil for Peace and Service of the Holy Eucharist, January 14, 2015
Christ Episcopal Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin
The Very Rev. Canon Patrick P. Augustine, D.Min. DD.
Matthew 5: 1-12

“Blessed are the Peacemakers”

We gather here tonight with our partners in faith communities to pray for peace in the face of terrorism and the brutal attacks in Paris by Islamic militants. It was an act of pure cruelty, killing cartoonists who use art to convey their message. One wonders what kind of religious purpose this serves, who did it help? We in the West believe in the freedom of expression – freedom to express our opinion. Also we must be aware what we consider freedom of expression may hurt people who do not think our way. God, Prophets, Saints and elders in the East are highly venerated and the public has no place to make fun or joke about them.

Last month, people of the same religious conviction known as the Taliban roared through a school in Peshawar, Pakistan shouting, “God is great”. Children hid under benches in their classrooms where the terrorist sought them out and killed them.

By the time the hour’s long siege ended more than 145 people – 132 children, 10 school staff members and three soldiers were dead. More than 100 others were injured mostly with gunshot wounds.

The situation in Nigeria also remains very dark as atrocities are committed by Boko Haram who wants to establish Islamic Sharia Law there. Recently a 10-year old girl was used to detonate a bomb in Maduguri killing 19 people. In Kenya, our own sponsored orphan student has disappeared in Kakamego county, an area where 4 other schoolgirls have been abducted and later found dead. Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab operates openly to harm people in the desert of Garissa, Kenya.

In our own nation the recent angst between races has also sown seeds of rage and killings.

God whom we come to worship and to offer our prayers for peace feels our pain. God has tears in His eyes, tears streaming down God’s face as God looks on the human condition and sees awful things happening in His name.

St. Paul in his letter to the church in Rome saw the suffering and chaos in his own time and writes:

I consider the sufferings of this present time... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” (Romans 8: 18-26)

God weeps as humanity suffers and the Holy Spirit intercedes for the change of the heart to repent for the perpetrators of violence and hate crimes.

Followers of Jesus know the truth- violence only leads to more violence. Jesus looks at this culture of violence and says in the Gospel, "Jesus saw a great crowd; and he had "compassion" for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (V.34). The four gospels show us that Jesus is a man of compassion.

This description is not mentioned by accident. It is the very embodiment of the prophetic traditions of ancient Israel which Jewish rabbi Abraham Heschel calls "divine pathos": "The Prophet God does not reveal himself in abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relationship to the world. He doesn't simply command and expect obedience; He is moved and affected by what happens in the world... God is concerned about the world and shares its fate. Indeed this is the essence of God's moral nature: His willingness to be intimately involved with the history of man". 1

Disciples of Christ can't be passive spectators or participants in violence. He offers us an alternative and expects action, "You have heard that it was said, "You should love your neighbor and hate your enemy" but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 4:43-44). This may sound naïve and weak to the powerful, just as the message of the cross seemed ineffective to the perpetrators of violence in Jesus time. But true disciples understand that we must redeem humanity from the bondage of violence, not wield it to tyrannize another.

Our mission is to proclaim the gospel of release and redemption even in the face of terror and death. The church is empowered by Jesus Christ to proclaim His message of healing and reconciliation. If we don't – who will? "In Christ, God reconciled the world to himself..and entrusted the message of reconciliation to us"(2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus sends his church on a twofold mandate: to love God and to love our neighbor. We can do both by recognizing and repeating these truths among people of all faiths,... even the faithless.

Christians and people of Islamic faiths must find ways to work together as Hans Kung a Catholic theologian has said, "There can be no peace among nations without peace among religions. Religious peace can only be established through religious dialogue." I invite the Islamic community in our nation and particularly in greater La Crosse area to join together with us to speak out against the acts of terrorism and promote peace. Followers of Christ should unceasingly pray for harmony and tolerance among all faith communities.

Our churches, temples, mosques and homes should be embassies of hospitality. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2. Henry Nowen says "Hospitality is our vocation: to convert *hostis into hospes*, the enemy into guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced."

May God guide and bless us to be the instruments of peace to create a world which is truly, "one world under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."