

Thursday Evening Council Eucharist 2019: Sermon Script
The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Brooke-Davidson
Bishop Suffragan, Diocese of West Texas

What a joy it is to walk in love behind a gigantic parade of the faithful pastors who love all of you, and seeing the love on all your faces. Can you feel it? The peace, the wholeness, the joy – the Shalom – of the Beloved Community? It feels like the shalom of the Garden of Eden, and the Shalom of the City of God, the New Jerusalem. Week by week we gather in the eighty-five plus campuses of our vast multi-site congregation - in Brady and Sonora and George West and Edna and Hebronville and Eagle Pass and Port Isabel – and seventy-eight more places where we fill our minds and heart with the words of Jesus with the teaching of Paul and the prophets. To break bread, and drink wine, to sing the songs of the saints. Shalom surrounds us and we feel love.

Then we are dismissed, and we get in the car and check the newsfeed on our phones and it happens: the vast chasm between the shalom in here and the mess out there opens up again. Outside, in all the places where the world is not yet remade, the air is rank with the acrid fumes of controversy, division, and deadlock. Our leaders are too busy attacking each other to lead. The name-calling and cyber trolling that fill our national news feeds infect our local communities and friends and families. Our landscape is increasing balkanized into red and blue zones, rich and poor zones – often tied to ethnic and racial zones. Our civic life is a mess, and everybody is yelling, hurling accusations and slogans and labels.

Labels like “conservative” and “progressive” that carry so much explosive tonnage that nobody really knows what they are code for anymore, really, except that if I’m a conservative, you are a snowflake, and if I’m a progressive, you are a neonazi. Shalom lies crumpled in a corner back at church, and we wonder if “walk in love” has a chance.

We don’t know how to fix the mess. We don’t know how to bridge the chasm working from one side, so we do what comes by instinct. A few join the fight, snarling at our adversaries, giving people “nicknames”, making jokes at other people’s expense, threatening to withhold our marbles from the game. Some flee, sometimes quietly, sometimes leaving a trail of destruction.

And most of us freeze. We just don’t engage with anything that might be dangerous. The list of things we can’t talk about gets longer and longer. The list of important, meaningful things that we *can* discuss with the people with whom we share our spiritual journeys and our lives get shorter and shorter. We do whatever we can to keep politics out of church so at least *this* - this moment of shalom - won’t be messed up.

These strategies have consequences. The people who *do* speak up often take over, because nobody wants a fight, and then everybody else shuts down. Nothing important gets discussed and the fellowship goes flat’ and the joy and the juice go out of everything. There’s a reason for the phrase “frozen chosen.” At some point, we can’t even remember how to talk. In the long run, it’s a high price to pay.

There is another option. You know, this is not the first time that the people of God have faced this problem. Life was like this when Jesus came along. You might say that this overwhelming avalanche of broken shalom, is exactly what Jesus was trying to teach us to fix. That’s right, to fix. By teaching us how to get back from the smoking wreckage we make of the world to the peaceable Kingdom that God intends. We don’t get there by sitting around. Not even by sitting around in here.

One day, Jesus went down near the Sheep Gate. I wonder – what sheep? The sacrificial sheep for the Temple? The lost sheep of the house of Israel? Interesting. Anyway, Jesus went down near the Sheep Gate, to the Pool of Beth-sada, Hebrew for House of Mercy. When the water in the pool troubled and stirred – the first person in

would be healed. Here at the House of Mercy Pool, there are five Porticos. To make it more comfortable for the lame, the blind, and the crippled. Why five? An odd number of porticos, architecturally speaking - I wonder why John found that detail significant? Five is not one of the big symbolic numbers in the Bible like three or four or seven or twelve. But five is the number the books of the law – Torah.

Hmm. Five porticos to make it more comfortable for the lame, the blind, the crippled to wait around the pool of the house of mercy. Five books of the law. Hmm.

Apparently, it's comfortable enough for one crippled man to hang around for thirty-eight years. Another strange detail – thirty-eight years. What does the number 38 signify – where else does it occur? Thirty-eight is the number of years that the Hebrew refugees from Egypt camped at the oasis at Kadesh Barnes on their way from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land. They stayed at Kadesh Barnea thirty-eight years, where a whole generation died instead of troubling the waters of the Jordan River and crossing into the promised land. Interesting.

So, Jesus comes down to the Pool of the House of Mercy by the Sheep Gate where a crippled man has been sitting on a bedroll in the five porticoes for thirty-eight years, and very incisively, Jesus asks the man, “Dude! Do you *wait* to be made well? Cause it is not evident that you do. You’ve got a bedroll there and all.”

“Well,” says the man, “nobody is fixing this for me. Other people have better helpers. There’s nothing I can do. *Ni modo.*” Jesus, having heard enough of this, says, “Get up. Pack up the bedroll. Walk.”

And then the trouble starts: “What? Who did this? You’re carrying your bedroll out? You’re supposed to be in the portico because the Book of the Law says no carrying bedrolls on the Sabbath! You were in the House of Mercy and somebody took mercy on you? Did anybody get that guy’s license plate?”

Students of systems theory will recognize the immediate and predictable response of the Established Order to a profound threat that comes not from a regime change or an election upset or armed rebellion or populist rallies. But from one act of integrity and mercy and love from a change in one person who thought he could not walk, and then found out he could. Who picked up the bedroll he had been sitting on at an oasis that became a place to wait to die – and who walked out into a new life of truth and love and freedom. One person changed, and the authorities went berserk.

My friends, the challenge is not to sit in love. There is time to sit to sit and rest, to sit and pray, to sit and teach. But love is a walk. Jesus healed people so they could walk. Like all of his signs, it was not simply about literal walking. It was about walking in love. So, what about love?

Both Jesus and Saint Paul spent a lot of time describing love. To the church in Corinth Paul wrote that piece we began Council with: (1 Cor 13). If I have all the eloquence of humanity and the angels but speak without love, I sound like a rusty gate or a car crash. Love is patient and kind. Love is not rude, arrogant, boastful, selfish, calculating – Love is about paying attention to you – not making sure you pay attention to me. Love is not always me first, Love is not belligerent, defensive, or narcissistic, or partisan. Love is kind: Love never calls people derogatory names or tells hateful or patronizing jokes. Love never tolerates racism, sexism, or any other way of labeling and dismissing people.

To walk in love is not just to exchange polite pleasantries as we stroll around in our comfort zone. To walk in love is to go out into unknown and uncomfortable territory where there are people we don’t fully understand, who make us nervous. Whether on the other side of the parish hall at coffee hour or on the other side of whatever tracks run through our towns and our hearts.

The alternative to our instinct is to fight, flee, or freeze, is to walk through this world with patience and kindness. And we can do it while maintaining our own deep convictions and our own healthy boundaries. Jesus modeled and taught that. Paul modeled and taught that. That's what the Way of Love is about.

As Bishop Reed said today, Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians, for example, is chock full of detail about what love looks like and what it doesn't look like. Read it! Here's why it matters, like a AED matters if your heart stops: **It matters because that is how we fix it. This is how we begin to repair the broken shalom.** This is how we pick up the bricks, one by one, out of the rubble of God's broken dream. And begin to stack up the buildings of Kingdom come.

You can't change the whole broken world. But you can change you. And that's the only change that has ever changed the world. The system changes when one of us changes. That's how it works. And this I believe: The Episcopal Church in the Diocese of West Texas is every bit as capable of changing the world in that way as the three thousand believers in Jerusalem changed the world, starting on the day of Pentecost. There are more of us than there were of them, and there are fewer people trying to kill us. We have a calling, my friend.

Now, I don't believe for a single minute that God loves Episcopalians more than Baptists or Catholics or Pentecostals. I don't think we are smarter or more theologically sophisticated. We're just us, people who love Jesus in this way.

But I do believe that we have deep in our DNA a peculiar genius, a charisma, if you will, that is exactly what this moment in history demands. It was forged in just such a time, centuries ago, when renaissance England was convulsed by rapid discontinuous change. Global exploration and trade changed the economic, political, technological, spiritual, and literal landscape, much as globalization and the internet are doing now. Conservatives and progressives literally killed each other, and partly just to stop the actual bloodshed, the Church of England found ways to hang tight to the core essentials and let the details sort themselves out. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough.

The Via Media - the middle way between a conservative understanding of faith and a progressive understanding of faith meant that we learned to live with the fact that we could not hammer out agreement on every detail. The via media was less about drawing lines in the sand and more about broadening the stakes of our tents. Instead of defining who was in and who was out, like some of the continental reformers did with confessions of the faith, we define ourselves by facing toward Jesus in our common worship of God.

I believe Episcopalians know, deep in our bones, how to navigate these waters, not by politely pretending there isn't a problem. But by daring to love one another in spite of everything. By refusing to label or dismiss or taunt or gloat. Because we decided, a long time ago, that what we agree about is a lot more important than what we disagree about. Can we live into that heritage? Can we trust that the love of Jesus, which binds us to him and to one another, is strong enough to withstand a conversation with somebody who sees things differently? Even things that really matter - tax policy, medical care, the environment, trade, crime, prisons, race relations, national security, poverty, immigration, guns?

Can we promise that whatever we bring to that conversation from our own life experience, our own heritage, our own fears, that we are safe with one another, that we assume the best about one another, that we want the best for one another, just as Jesus does for us?

One more story:

A couple of weeks ago a comedian named Patton Oswalt - who, by the way, you should not look up because you would faint from shock at his language - Oswalt was commenting on the political situations, and posted a derogatory tweet about the President. A supporter of the president, Michael Beatty, joined the Twitter fray,

replying that he enjoyed watching Oswald's TV character die the show. The exchange deteriorated from there. Then Oswald discovered that Beatty was struggling to pay medical bills from two weeks in the hospital with a septic diabetic coma. Oswald immediately changed his tune, directing his Twitter followers to Beatty's GoFundMe page, saying this, "Aw, man. This dude just attacked me on Twitter and I joked back but then I looked at his timeline and he's in a LOT of trouble health-wise. I'd be [angry] too. He's been dealt some [crummy] cards — let's deal him some good ones. Click and donate — just like I'm about to."

Oswald donated \$2,000 to the fund, which soon surpassed \$30,000 – well past Beatty's \$5,000 goal. Beatty tweeted in response, "Patton: you have humbled me to the point where I can barely compose my words. You have caused me to take pause and reflect on how harmful words from my mouth could result in such an outpouring. He added, "Patton Oswald managed to not only let me slide on a rough tweet to him but started something that has me reevaluating friendships and productive dialogue regardless of political affiliation. He's a good man and I hope that I can meet him one day to cement a relationship."

If that act of kindness changed the hearts of political enemies and multiplied the generosity of strangers following a comedian on Twitter, imagine what might happen if the world saw **us** - church people - walking in love - taking action that puts other first, even when we deeply disagree over the really hard, scary, triggering stuff!

What if everybody saw *us* offering healing and help and hope breaking bread, drinking wine, singing songs, and having meaningful conversations about things that matter with people from the other side of the chasm? You can't change anybody else – you learned that in Adulthood 101, right? But we can allow God working in us to change us. And that changes everything. Have you ever felt lame, blind, paralyzed? Have you ever waited right next to the pool of the house of mercy waiting for somebody else to carry you? Is there any sense in which you have gotten comfortable under the shade of the porticoes and risked missing the journey to God's Promised Land?

Well, today can be the day that changes. Jesus is just as much here today as he was by the sheep gate in Jerusalem in 30 AD. Do you want to be made well? Do you want this mad, crazy world to be made well? Are you willing to be the change? Jesus said, "love one another, love your enemies. That's how the world will know. That's what will fix things. We're a small, rather quirky branch of the Jesus movement. There are 5.5 million people living within the boundaries of our diocese. There are maybe 40 or 50,000 of us. That's still 37,000 more than Peter started with.

And so, I say to you - The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas - Get up; pick up your bedroll, and walk. Lead the world back into the shalom of God. Walk in love, as Jesus the Messiah loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.