

Sermon: C Proper 15 2016
St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods
14 August 2016
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Luke 12:49-56
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Jeremiah 23:23-29
Psalm 82

Today's readings give us pause. A renowned New Testament professor at The School of Theology, The University of the South, was once heard to say "There's not much good news in the Scripture today!" From Jeremiah's caution about false prophets to the Letter to the Hebrews great cloud of witnesses who remained faithful to God in trying circumstances--even to death, to Jesus stunning announcement that he came not to bring peace but division, we wonder why we got out of bed this morning, much less got ourselves here!

But as Christians we need to be reminded occasionally that being a follower of Jesus is not always easy and inevitably demands we make some hard, unpopular choices along the way if we are to be true to what was promised for or by us when we were baptized. The day comes along to every one of us when our faith in God is tested. We know deep down that a certain "fire in the belly" is needed to be a true follower of Jesus. "Witness and sacrifice" are not just churchy words, but obligations, costly necessities if we are to make a difference for good in this world in the Name of Jesus.

The words we just sang sum up what all this is about for me:

"They cast their nets in Galilee just off the hills of brown;
such happy, simple fisherfolk, before the Lord came down. . . .
The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Let let us pray for but one thing--the marvelous peace of God."

William Alexander Percy wrote those words that have inspired me ever since I first sang them as a child. His story and the story of another courageous disciple are what resonates in me with the challenge Jesus puts before us disciples today.

Percy was born in 1885 into the planter aristocracy of Greenville, a Mississippi delta town dependent on good cotton crops and the great River. A poet by nature, William was educated at Sewanee and then Harvard Law School. He served in World War I, returning as a decorated soldier. As an upper class southerner, William was used to easy relations with the negroes who worked for

them at home and on their plantations, the term “African American” not having yet made it into the American vocabulary. For years William and his father fought the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in northern Mississippi and aided many needy African Americans.

In 1927 the Mississippi River flooded towns and farms from Iowa southward, the most dramatic and perilous destruction by water imaginable. Greenville, Mississippi, was not spared. Poor, mostly black people fled to higher ground, eventually marooned on the levee between the River and the town. William was put in charge of relief operations in Greenville and began to evacuate black refugees along with whites, a move that angered white planters, including his own family, who feared what might happen if the negroes dispersed, because they were the labor force needed to work the plantations. Tensions mounted; William was discredited, but stayed on, trying to manage the situation.

A refugee camp was set up by the Red Cross for the blacks who had no other place to go. Racial tensions increased as the floodwaters lingered for months and the poor people in the camp felt more and more like prisoners. Social chaos followed from which Greenville never fully recovered. Exhausted, William resigned and left Greenville. Returning years later as head of the Percy family, William paid for the educations of many black youth, aided black families, and did whatever he could to ease race relations in Greenville, but he felt he never could erase the terrible racist legacy control by the white planters had caused. William Alexander Percy cast his net in Greenville, Mississippi. For him the Peace of God was “strife closed in the sod,” something forged day after day as he tried to head off racial conflict in Greenville until his death in 1942.

Fifty-one years ago today a young Episcopal seminarian was gunned down in Hayneville, Alabama, as he, a Roman Catholic priest, and a young, black civil rights worker walked up the steps of a small store. The white deputy who shot him was acquitted by an all white jury. Since that time, Jonathan Myrick Daniels has been remembered on our church calendar as a martyr. Many have made pilgrimages to Hayneville in his memory. I led a group from my parish in New Orleans years ago. It was a moving experience, especially for the youth in our midst. We stood on those very steps praying for our country, for an end to racial tension, for the peace of God.

Later about 300 people gathered in the Court House just across the square from those steps--a gathering of Episcopalians, black and white, and townspeople from Hayneville and places nearby. What touched me most deeply that day were the testimonies of folks who had been there on that terrible day. They spoke of the hard times the civil rights movement had brought in the south, of how hard it was to understand people coming down from the north to try to change things--the things they had always been taught and had grown used to, but they also told how important it was that it had awakened them to the deeper truth of racial equality as God's will for all people. The death of Jonathan Daniels haunts them still, but good has come of it.

Powerful Christian witness merits our attention, touches our hearts and encourages us to do our part for the good God desires for every human being. When our lives become witness to the power of Christ to make a difference for others we find within us that deeper peace forged out of the fire of sacrifice.

Today then "Let us pray for but one thing--the marvelous peace of God."