

## St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



### Mid-Summer 2012

#### A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, My Grandfather died before I was born, but my mother often told stories that he had told her. His original stories were, of course, in Slovak and not English. I understand they were told with much animation and humor. They could be lengthened or shortened depending upon the time, place and mood. One that frequently comes to mind takes place in a small vilage deep in the Carpathian Mountains. On the edge of the village is a little peasant hut. As the story unfolds all the villagers are gathered in front of it, as various characters step inside for a look. The Mayor goes in and comes out again, his face a mask of grief. "It's just horrible!" he says. "The axe is hanging over the baby's cradle. This does not bode well for the future of our village!" Then the doctor enters. He comes out shaking his head. "This is a very unhealthy situation - the axe hanging like that over the baby's cradle." The constable enters the hut and stomps out saying, "There ought to be a law against such a thing! The axe hangs right over the baby's cradle!" The priest goes in to take a look and returns with hands clasped together saying, "It's a dreadful thing! The axe hanging over the baby's cradle. We must pray about it!" The story could go on, but by now you get the picture. The typical response is, "So why not remove the axe?" Why, indeed!

News reports of the movie theater massacre in Aurora, Colorado and the trial of the gunman in the shootings that wounded a congresswoman and killed several people including a child in Tucson, Arizona fill the airwaves. These stories stir up memories of the shooting sprees at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech. The public and media reaction is always the same. Shock! Horror! Handwringing! Followed by endless discussions about how this happened, the state of mind of the shooter, and what went wrong with security or rescue services. Somewhere along the way there will be announcements of what the authorities are going to do to see that it doesn't happen again. **Never** in America will you hear a loud and serious discussion about gun control. (The fact that I have said the phrase has surely turned some readers off already!) We just don't discuss it. Did our forebears (who never knew what a six shooter was, never mind an automatic rifle!) have our present armed state of affairs in mind when they wrote the Second Ammendment? Is the National Rifle Association such an effective bully that they can stifle all discussion? Perhaps so, but I would point out in response to their "People kill, not guns!" campaign that people kill and not cars, **but** we have at least some tests and requirements in place for those we allow to operate motor vehicles. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that people should not own handguns or rifles. I'm saying that it's time to

have a sensible discussion about how that should look. Because - frankly - as long as people find the gun culture we presently live in to be acceptable, I really have few tears of anguish to waste on the recent tragedies or those that will most certainly be happening. All we can hope in this gun culture is that we might be able to slow down some of the violence - a bandaid solution - but it's the best we can do! This is why I think often of my grandfather's tale of the axe and the baby's cradle.

The inability to talk about gun control is a symptom of a larger problem facing us. We actually can't talk about much of anything. In reaction to the election of President Obama the Tea Party emerged and the legislative branch of government was packed with people whose only response to any initiative is, "Just say no!" The whole concept of government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" is stalled by the notion of "my way or the highway!" The idea of "compromise" has become virtually blasphemous to some. It used to be the way that we blended our best thinking to produce creative solutions to community problems.

Some trade-offs were made, sure. Everyone - and every district - has some special interest. It was a way of giving attention to all points of view. Those who sneer at the idea of compromise, suggest that it is inherently evil, because people sell out their ideals. This actually touches the heart of the problem which cripples our ability to function as a united people or to live at peace in the world.

The uncompromising attitude of the Tea Party is cut from the same cloth as the uncompromising fundamentalism of certain brands of militant Islam - or militant Judaism or militant Christianity. I won't mince words. When you hold an idea or ideal that is so absolute that there can be no compromise - no way living creatively with people of a different opinion - that idea is like a fundamentalist religious belief. You may not actually say that God has told you that the rich shall not have a higher tax rate or that the free market or the financial sector should never be regulated. But if you treat these ideas as if they can never be on the table for discussion, you are in essence declaring just that - that these ideas are not just opinions to be held, but truths from on high never to be compromised. And the world - not just the nation - is filled with a whole slew of such truths. Sometimes God's name is dragged into it, and sometimes not. Uncompromising truth, in any case, creates an environment in which there can only be winners and losers - never a united people living in justice, harmony and peace with each other.

The strident voices who disparage compromise in civic life have their counterparts within the life of the Church as well. Our Anglican Church has long been mocked by those with unbending rules and opinions, because we are the very soul of compromise. We claim to be catholic Christians, yet we also claim to be evangelicals. We allow a great deal of latitude for believers, adhering to no single theological system. We claim Scripture and Sacrament, Creed and Ministry as the four points of our compass, but these are lived out in a variety of ways. Truthfully, we often laugh at ourselves. There are, of course, truths to which we hold that can never be compromised. That Jesus is Lord and that his is the only name under heaven by which we must be saved - these are things we believe. But by the very nature of who Jesus was and how he lived among us and what he calls us to do, these are not beliefs that make it impossible for us to compromise. Our Lord Jesus compels us to live in constructive peace with those who differ from us. Listen to what St. Paul says to the Church in Rome as he shares with them his vision of living in Christ.

***“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:9-21)***

“Hold fast to what is good.” The One who good is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To him we hold fast and live in love with him and one another. That love is absolute - totally self-giving and self-effacing. Since God is love, this love cannot be compromised. But living in God’s love drives us to seek peace and harmony with our neighbors. It leads us to share our best ideas, but not to fear the ideas of others. It certainly disallows forcing our opinions down everyone else’s throat. Our Lord Jesus may have been critical of the wrong direction sometimes taken by his pharisaical detractors, but never did he suggest that they were not deeply loved by God. Living in God’s love leads us to be the kind of people who respect all people. God’s love casts out fear.

As I write this, we are about to begin the “silly season” of presidential election hype. Nasty and essentially mindless ads will blight the airwaves, each vying to create the winning sound bite. (I am grateful for my remote!) The chances of there being any genuine discussion of how we might best work for the common good are slim indeed. Each ad - each action or cry of mindless grandstanding - will in its way become another nail in the coffin of civic cooperation. Perhaps that will be our fate - the end of the dream of democracy. Crashed on the rocks of hardline fundamentalism at home and abroad! Empires do come and go. Worlds do change. But that spark of hope which is the kingdom of God - that hope which Jesus came to proclaim - that time of justice, mercy and peace - that is out there on the horizon. Yet it is as much within our grasp as the blessed Sacrament which we reach out our hands to receive at God’s Table. Jesus proclaimed that kingdom near. It is necessary that we turn toward it. Through him we can enter it. The first word that we hear at the door of that kingdom is, “Do not be afraid.” When our fears are cast out, we might just be able to begin as a community to move forward again in unity and the bond of peace.

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