

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring
Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:24-30,36-43
July 19, 2020



We worship together this morning, giving thanks to God for the life of a great American icon. John Lewis, our representative in Congress in this city of Atlanta, a friend to so many, seemingly afraid of only fear itself, and was the last remaining speaker from the 1963 'March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom'. John Lewis was one of the original 13 Freedom Riders, challenging Interstate travel in the South in 1961. He founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which organized sit-ins at lunch-counters to oppose segregated dining. He led a march and was severely beaten by state troopers on the Edmund Peters Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 1965, a Bloody Sunday which propelled the passage of the Voting Rights Act to be signed into law just months later. Mr. Lewis was arrested over 40 times, was repeatedly beaten by police, spent numerous nights in jails, and was brutalized by his white fellow citizens again and again, notably when he and the other Freedom Riders were attacked by a mob of men, women, and perhaps most shockingly of all, children - by some accounts into the hundreds - armed with baseball bats, pieces of metal, and even everyday household items turned into weapons.

Yet, in the face of all that stood in his way, all that threatened his safety and even his life, he persisted. He persisted in the pursuit of the vision for a beloved community, for a vision of what it means to share life with others in America that was so much better than the brutal violence and degradation he so often suffered at the hands of others in his earlier years. He persisted to answer the call that he heard upon his life not to get lost in despair but to struggle, for a lifetime, in hope. We are proud to have called him our Congressman for these past three decades and more, and America is poorer for his loss. John Lewis, may you rest in peace and rise in glory.

We should pay tribute these coming days. We should give thanks to God for a man's life that embodied in so many ways the virtues of public office when it is exercised as faithful leadership. We should name how significant it is when our children can look up to leaders who exemplify dignity and decency. And in listening to the stories of John Lewis of those many years ago, we should urge one another to listen to the elders among us whose living memories are so essential to the prospects for a future that is able to learn from and honor its past.

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There can be no greater tribute than the commitment of our lives. And for you and I, constituted as we are in Christ Jesus, that commitment has common ground to gather upon. Here, we proclaim life. Here, we yearn for dignity and respect for every human being. Here, we celebrate new birth. And here, we mourn and offer our heartfelt gratitude for those who have passed on to a greater glory. Yet, more than anything, here, we are called to be changed that the world around us might change; not changed to the semblance of our own visions for humanity, but changed according to God's kingdom vision of justice and love.

So, dear saints of God, are you ready for a change? Are you ready to be moved and moulded and re-formed? Are you ready for the life you have known to be upended by the plight of the poor and the downtrodden whom you have yet to know as intimately as you might? Are you ready for God to work in you much more than you can conjure by your own powers of imagination?

For the church is not in the religious information business. She is not about easy lessons for a Sunday morning that we can be politely put aside when Monday comes around. The world is God's business, Christ's first love - all of it, every dark valley of brutality and despair, and every high mountain of loving proximity and tender care. And so, to be in God's church, to be God's people, we have to reckon with the fact that we are called to be fit for purpose, which to take the apostle Paul's imagery on board, means that we have get ourselves in spiritual shape in order to run the race that is set before us.

So what is gospel for us this morning with that pressing need in mind? Well, as always, Jesus does not disappoint. I would highlight for you just these four words from his parable of the wheat and weeds, that in the struggle to tend to land that sprouts forth growth that is both good and ill for our sustenance, we must 'collect the weeds first'.

As the young John Lewis embarked on the Freedom Rides across the South where the weeds of racial enmity and violence had grown thick and high, he faced opposition to this effort from an earlier icon of the civil rights movement, Thurgood Marshall, who urged the riders to consider the judicial process rather than what he saw as a potentially dangerous form of direct action. Hindsight makes such judgements too easy to critique, but what remained a clear rallying cry for Lewis was the prominent importance of first, collecting the weeds. First, go to where the trouble lies. First, seek to remove what denies life, and then set about the work of building up a shared and integrated society.

It's an age old tension within movements for change: between direct opposition and incremental collaboration, between protest-making and peace-building. And it is too easy for people to look on and condemn one in preference for the relative ease of the other. Yet for us, for those who dare to proclaim Jesus as Lord, tending to the weeds, moving straight to the heart of the matter, is something unavoidable within the life of faith.

You and I have to ask, where are the weeds growing in our own lives? Where are the shoots of hope and justice being throttled by deep-rooted views and behaviors that we may not yet be fully aware of? Sometimes we are active in our cultivation of these sort of weeds, yet most often they just grow up all around us and within us without us even noticing.

Let me speak for my own part. The weeds that have grown in my own life have rooted themselves deep within the discourse of white privilege. Not to recognize it as so would be absurd at this point in our nation's story. Like many people, I have struggled against challenges and worked hard, I have faced setbacks and disappointments, yet in all of that I have had a tremendous advantage, planting my life within a global discourse about race that has enabled me to flourish in ways well beyond the accidents of my birth and upbringing. I worked very hard to gain admission to some fantastic universities, but I never had to overcome any doubts about me in other people's minds on the basis of my race. I have served the church for over 20 years on three different continents, but never have had to find a way to make my voice heard because of my race, or my gender, my sexual orientation or identity, or because of the abilities of my physical body. These have been profound privileges and their rootedness in my life has been such that I haven't needed to tend to their growth because that growth has been taking care of itself all along. These privileges are truly weeds within the imagery of Jesus' teaching because they advantage me by dis-advantaging other people. People of color, and women, and non-heterosexuals, and people who are dis- or differently abled.

As a white man, in a position of authority, accorded a certain degree of deference and respect, it is surely incumbent upon me not only to name that there are weeds growing within my life that need excavation, but to urge each of us to attend to the weeds that grow around us every day. We have to start with ourselves, for unless we attain some sort of spiritual health we will be of little use to the world beyond ourselves. Yet I know that I cannot do this work of uprooting the weeds within me by myself. I need you to help me do that, just as I need God's love and forgiveness to make that effort a means of God's grace. I believe that you need me too; that we need each other to assist one another in tilling the ground on our beings, and to help all that is good and noble grow in us, transformed as we will be in Christ Jesus.

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May we look to the time ahead with companionship in our sights. May we seek to be in communion with one another, and with those we have yet to meet, especially those whose lives are different to our own. And may that communion be marked by tender and loving care, with confession and forgiveness, with an attentive commitment to the flourishing of the other who stands before us.

John Lewis lived a life for others. Let us commit ourselves to honor his memory and walk across the bridges that divide one side of our city and our world from another. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a people who tend to one another's lives. May God grant us the strength and courage to walk in that kind of kingdom as saints in this church.

Amen.