

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

Sunday, November 15, 2020



In the name of the Holy One who holds us and our future. Amen.

2020 is historic for many reasons. Perhaps less celebrated are the ubiquitous lawn signs you can glimpse any day in our city, just as surely as throughout the state of Georgia. Exclamations like “What a year it’s been this week!” stand alongside kindness credo(s), noteworthy, not notorious. Even Episco-peeps have gotten in the game, with #loveyourneighbor Midtown mantras. Proper nouns have morphed into gerunds. Rebus puzzles temp brains to imagistic word play.

Such declarations are more than mere diversion. Signs of our times, they beg us to attend to those dueling commitments and values in contemporary society. Because certain trouble arises whenever “the way I see it” shouts past or denigrates another, prioritizing some over others, in ways that damage the common good.

One standing conversation showcased on adjacent lawns in Ansley Park illustrates my point. The first sign reads: “Our future flies with pollinators.” Inches away, another neighbor proudly advertises for a local pest control company.

Happy pollinators don’t sting repeatedly like other winged pests.

Chubby carpenter and honey bees are far more welcome in my garden than angrier compatriots like yellow jackets, wasps and hornets. Whatever bees, bats, butterflies, and beetles do for you, a hopeful vision of our future still may differ between us. But belonging to God’s creaturely collective surely invites us to stay connected as we move forward in our planetary orbit, together.

In 2006, the USDA acknowledged significant annual declines in honey bee colonies, a phenomenon scientists came to call Colony Collapse Disorder (or CCD). CCD flags rapid, unexpected bee loss within a hive, as worker bee populations disappear and leave behind the queen, young bees and significant reserves of honey. But without those worker bees, the hive cannot sustain itself and eventually dies. Researchers are exploring the effects of pathogens, parasites, pesticides and environmental stressors when it comes to this dysfunction.

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The National Conference of State Legislatures felt there was at least some connection. Since measuring a 12% decline in the honey bee population between 2012 and 2017, 28 states have passed related legislation to address the threat to our ecological health, food system, and national economy. That's a fair share of Americans wanting fruits and veggies to stick around, just as I do.

Today's vignette from the Book of Judges marks a season in the life of ancient Israel, decades into their residency in that promised land, said to be "flowing with milk and honey." This is the only Sunday in any liturgical year where we hear stories in church from the Book of Judges. And this pithy text stands apart, humming with energy that begs investigation.

The cycles of sin, punishment, and deliverance that drone on in the years of Israel's judges, have everything to do with that infamous "I trouble." Disaster foretold didn't warn them off from worshipping false gods for very long, you see. The people's robust pledges of allegiance from last week's Old Testament passage, those have long since faded out. The land is now abuzz with darker woes. Suffering afflicts the whole nation, which has devolved into chaos, as everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

That refrain repeats throughout these stories of disconnection, disruption, and demoralization. The people dishonor God's covenant with them, despite his faithfulness, delivering them out of slavery in Egypt. The bottom line of this entire biblical book is that nobody does what is right. (In case you were looking for that "TL;dr" summary). What seems right in my eyes often leads to suffering. And not just for myself. Sin is like quicksand. It's hard to steer clear of it and even harder to escape, once you're in it. And we've all gotta live with its consequential sting.

Despite their persistent death-wish, as the people worship whatever they choose, God raises up one leader after another to save Israel from demise. We could get bored by this rinse and repeat cycle, except today we hear the unique story of the only female judge in Israel's recorded history.

Deborah wears her authority with queenly poise. On a hillside, under the date-palm tree—an open-air seat of authority where all and any may gather—Deborah's holds court in Israel. Amid the terror of those times, she reassures them God will break the oppressive iron fist of Sisera, King Jabin's cutthroat Canaanite commander.

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In Hebrew, Deborah's name means "bee." And this queen bee restores order to an unholy hive. Pointing them back to the Torah, teaching each to walk again in God's ways, everyone, together. Deborah dispenses medicine to her people, the only healing tonic that could save them—that truth of God's law and order, revealed in that overarching ethic of love; yes, love is the essence of those great commandments, where relationships only ever survive and thrive as they are rooted and grounded in God's goodness.

Had Israel clung to that law in the first place, the nation never would have kissed away that precious sweetness to which the Psalmist testifies: "The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether... sweeter than honey and drippings of the honeycomb."

For years, I found local honey an able antidote to seasonal allergies. But I had not thoroughly appreciated honey's significance in the ancient Near Eastern world.

Archaeologist Gil Stein, director of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, is a beekeeper as well as a professor. Stein's excavations at Hacinebi, a Mesopotamian colony in Turkey that was part of the world's first colonial system, illustrate how Anatolian honeybees were imported to diverse places in the Iron Age, including the Jordan River Valley in Northern Israel.

Honey's worth, then as now, is precious. Not simply good for food and sweetening, or an ingredient for fermented beverages like mead and honey wine, but also used in medicines for its antimicrobial and antibiotic properties, as well as its power to heal burns. Honey was even employed in mummification and graced the graves of kings in Egypt, where beekeeping is first attested in the ancient Near East.

Beyond magically harvesting such "bee food" for human use beekeepers the world over note the complex social hierarchy of bees: for these creatures, the unit is not the individual, but rather the collective.

Even if pollinators haven't made it on your radar and lawn signs are just another aspect of 2020 you can't wait to dismiss in a few weeks, I'm willing to bet the collective good has featured somewhere in your present commitments and personal values, even before you consider our communal prayer life at All Saints'.

As you heard in this week's prayers today, 2020's sting of death hasn't gone anywhere. Adding to such grief for our dear departed, was the passing of another gentle global leader, for whom we are the poorer in his loss. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, died a week ago yesterday. May his memory be a blessing.

Early in the pandemic, Sacks' live-streamed derashot comforted many with homiletic wisdom, myself included. Praised for his work on the Dignity of Difference, Sacks' final book was published this September. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, expands Sacks' ideas showcased in his 2017 Ted Talk, "How We Can Face the Future Without Fear, Together."

Sacks writes with hope and courage about the "I-Thou" of fellowship and community he believes will reverse what he calls the "cultural climate change" in contemporary societies, where life is organized around an "I" more so than the "We." Turns out, ancient Israel wasn't alone in struggling with persistent problems attributable to "I trouble."

Sack's book is well-worth your time, especially if you are discerning ways to renew your faith commitments as we live through this clarifying season in our country. Our baptismal promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving God perhaps most fully when we love our neighbors as ourselves, confirm that this journey is not one we make alone.

Such a covenant pledges each of us to order our lives by that greatest commandment by which Jesus himself lived and died faithfully. Moral renewal in our time, as Sacks underscores, will never successfully be legislated by any government. It will, however, involve each of us choosing to die to self as we work to honor one another, sacrificing so that all yet may flourish. More than lawn signs will be needed to stir our passion to engage the difficult work ahead, as we dare to live with hope for this human hive, rather than succumbing to a collective nightmare, devastated by fear-charged warring values.

Deborah's story of deliverance lifts up God's law of love as the only sure defense against every fear that clouds our vision, now as in those days of old. Ordering personal attitudes and communal actions under such an ethic of love both humbles and uplifts us, rooting us in the God-given dignity of our interrelatedness, where the healing hum of grace can transform us and our world.

May we surrender to the mercy and justice of the Holy One, who dismantles these fears that dominate our public life and frees us for our life-affirming mission. No matter how isolated, disconnected, or disenchanting we may find ourselves amid this yet-unfinished historic year, may God's love be the only law by which we order our commitments, values, and behavior, now and evermore. Amen.

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