

Old South Church in Boston

Sunday, August 13, 2017

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sanctuary. Refuge. Shelter. Shade.

A sermon by Rev. Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister

Based on Isaiah 25:1, 4

Based on Isaiah 25:1, 4 - *O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat*

Here's the question: "Is Old South Church called by God to provide sanctuary to an individual or family threatened with deportation? Are we prepared to act in violation of Federal Immigration Law?"

The Christian Service and Outreach Committee and Church Council, together, are asking the members of this church to consider this question and, in the fall, to take it to a vote. There are weighty matters to consider as we enter into a season of discernment.

Before beginning my sermon – before trying to frame this question, theologically, biblically, spiritually – I will ask the members of the church, just the full members, to reaffirm the covenant promises we have made to God and to each other.

May I ask, therefore, that those of you who are members of this church – you, who bear responsibility before God for this church – to rise now in body or in spirit? The covenant is printed in your bulletins.

I do now in the presence of God and before this assembly give myself to the One whom Jesus called "Abba, Father" as the God in whose love I am grounded and whose realm I serve; to Jesus Christ, God incarnate, to whom I surrender and who rules my life; to God the Holy Spirit as the One who sustains, recreates, and guides me. I will share God's everlasting covenant by loving and living responsibly in communion with this one God. And I do furthermore engage to walk with my brothers and sisters in the wider Church and the Old South Church secure in God's grace, prepared in gratitude to live by the promise and serve in the hope of the Gospel.

I have spoken this covenant countless times over the 13 years I have served as your Senior Minister. It is dense, thick, this Covenant, every word ripe and heavy with meaning. But there is a particular sentence, a vow, that always catches my attention ... and catches my breath: *I give myself to the One whom Jesus called "Abba, Father" as the God in whose love I am grounded and whose realm I serve ... whose realm I serve.* That phrase ... it catches my attention and it catches my breath because it implies other realms than God's ... other realms you and I might reasonably serve ... perhaps multitudes of other realms.

For instance, there are the realms of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the City of Boston and the United States of America ... realms in which I am citizen and resident ... in which I pay taxes, vote, and to whose laws I am subject.

I admit before you that I move in and among these different realms, back and forth, crossing borders to leave one and enter another, all the time.

We are, most of us – if we are searingly honest, and confessional – visitors to God’s realm. We come and go. We’re not full on citizens, most of us. Some of us are visitors, some more like immigrants, or permanent residents ... or here on study visas just to learn. Some of you may be tourists: just popping in on God’s realm for a look-see.

Today, as we ask: “Is Old South Church called by God to provide sanctuary to an individual or family threatened with deportation?” I want to turn for help, for guidance to a person who is not a visitor to God’s realm, but a full-on citizen: the Prophet Isaiah. With respect to his citizenship in God’s realm, Isaiah is all in.

Isaiah – one of the so called major prophets of Israel – is here with us today as he is every week. He presides over our worship from that stained glass window over yonder. And, don’t think the preachers in this pulpit aren’t aware of Isaiah’s ever-present glare. Don’t think we don’t consider the rigid plumb-line by which he surely measures our sermons.

You should know this about Isaiah: he spent an awful lot of his time on earth angry. Angry at human arrogance and hypocrisy; angry at greed and injustice. Angry at the imbalances ... at the rich being so very rich, so hard-heartedly rich; and the poor being so very poor, so desperately-unto-death poor.

And, here’s the thing: Isaiah’s anger, is God’s anger. That’s what makes him a prophet. He actually feels what God feels and because he feels what God feels, Isaiah is thereby empowered to speak for God. That’s what a full-on prophet is and does. And, Isaiah, he’s a full-on, prophet ... an all-the-time, full-fledged citizen of the realm of God.

In the verses read today, Isaiah, who is usually angry with his fellow humans, is ebullient with his thanksgiving to God.

O Lord, you are my God; He sings. I will exalt you, I will praise your name;

Why is that Isaiah?

For you, God, have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat

In other words, in contrast to most humans, God’s kindnesses, especially to the most vulnerable – to those out in the cold, those in need – are concrete and generous, in fact life-saving.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures God is preoccupied with concern for three classes of people: widows, orphans, and aliens.

Listen From the Hebrew Scriptures, the First Testament, from the Torah or Books of Law:

From the Book of Deuteronomy (17): “The Lord your God is the God of all gods and Lord of all Lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God who doesn’t play favorites and doesn’t take bribes. He enacts justice for orphans and widows, and he loves immigrants, giving them food and clothing. That means you must also love immigrants because you were immigrants in Egypt”

From the Book of Exodus (23:9 NLT): “You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it’s like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt”

From the Book of Leviticus (19:33-34 ESV): “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God”

From the Book of Deuteronomy (24:19-21 NIV): “When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow”

And, from the Prophets:

From the Book of the Prophet Zechariah (7:10 CEB): “Don’t oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor; don’t plan evil against each other!”

From the Prophet Malachi (3:5 HCSB): “‘I will come to you in judgment, and I will be ready to witness against . . . those who oppress the widow and the fatherless, and cheat the wage earner; and against those who deny justice to the foreigner. They do not fear Me,’ says the Lord of Hosts”

From the Prophet Jeremiah (22:3 ESV): “Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place”

From the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (16.13): “Give advice, offer counsel. Let Moab’s outcasts find asylum among you. Be a shelter for them”

And from the New Testament:

From Mathew’s Gospel (25:35-40 NASB) “‘For I was hungry, and you gave Me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in? The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me’”

From the Epistle to the Hebrews (13:2 NIV): “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it”

Two of the parable stories in our Boylston Street windows also illustrate the same divine insistence. First, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You may recall that Jesus is asked a question, “Who is my neighbor? He answers by spinning out the tale of the Good Samaritan, thus revealing the answer to the question: Anyone in need.

There is also the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. A parable in which those who arrive late, the late comers, are treated exactly as those who arrived earlier.

These words, these admonitions and pleadings come from our sacred texts; texts to which we are beholden. They come to us from those who inhabit and serve God's realm; the realm – Old South Church members – we ourselves have pledged to serve.

I believe that our sacred texts give clear, consistence testimony to how we are to treat the stranger, the foreigner, the alien. Across both testaments, in law, in prophecy, in story and parable, the Bible urges, nay, requires the citizen to befriend and care for, to welcome and support the immigrant.

Here's the thing: should we agree to heed the ancient scriptures, should we agree to engage in providing sanctuary to a person or persons threatened with deportation, we will do so in direct defiance and in violation of Federal law.

A recent statement from the US Department of Homeland Security states threateningly: "Sanctuary jurisdictions across the US willfully violate Federal law in an attempt to shield aliens from removal from the United States."

In the insert – the Announcements insert – there is a page with two images on it. First, "Frith Stool" and second, a "Sanctuary Ring." Both give evidence of the ancient right of churches to declare sanctuary, and by so doing, to harbor those who are in peril.

Should Old South Church agree to participate in today's sanctuary movement – while we will be in violation of Federal law – we will have centuries of precedent on our side. We will have scripture on our side: the teachings of the Bible and the witness of the church.

And, not least, if I am right, if my reading of scripture is borne out, we will have on our side, both the Prophet Isaiah and the Savior Jesus.

You ask me ... that's some mighty fine company.

Scripture Reading

Isaiah 25:1, 4

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm.