

NOT AGAIN. WHAT DO I SAY THIS TIME?

LABOR DAY – SEPTEMBER 1, 2019

BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN

CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

I had a great preaching teacher in seminary, Dr. Paul Harms.

Dr. Harms said that none of our parishioners was at all interested in the process that we used in coming up with our sermons.

I am quite sure he was right, but this week, Oy. You get to hear it.

Monday morning, I read all the lessons, ones I had chosen to focus on Labor Day.

I jotted down the outline of a homily, pleased I had a good jump on the week.

On Monday afternoon, my cell phone, basically an extension of my arm, suddenly stopped working. Just. Stopped.

Tuesday, I took it to the repair shop and was told

they would have a diagnosis of the problem in 24-48 hours.

24-48 hours without a phone? Seriously? I felt disoriented.

We don't even have a land line at home any more!

Indeed, for the next 3 days, if I wanted to call someone,

I had to hike over here to my office at the church. So annoying.

But my First World Problem inspired another round of sermon thoughts focusing on both Labor Day and my forced hiatus from my phone.

Later Wednesday, though, all eyes became focused on Hurricane Dorian.

Thursday morning the staff and I all went into preliminary Emergency Plan mode.

Would we even have a church service Sunday?

And how was I going to manage caring for Good Shepherd during a hurricane without a cell phone? Aaargh!

Late Thursday afternoon, the shop called Gus to say my phone was a brick; it would cost more to repair than the phone was worth.

So off I scurried in rush hour traffic on US 19 to get a new phone.

In the store are TV monitors with ever-more-dire hurricane updates.

First thing Friday morning, with a new phone extending from my arm,

I slipped into a Publix for water and kale.

You get what you need to get through a storm, I'll get what I need.

Meanwhile, there were reports of offices and meetings being cancelled, schools closing next week, and the typical media-generated panic.

I've lived in Florida for 20 years, and the panic pattern is pretty predictable.

Even so, I'd stopped thinking much about preaching,

sure I'd be telling all y'all to stay home and stay safe on Sunday.

Then I watched in wonder Friday as the expected path of the storm began to shift east.

Maybe I'd be preaching after all; I had a great start already,

though I was going to add the reminder that when a hurricane's path changes and now it's steering away from us, it means we're lucky, not blessed.

God loves the people of the Bahamas every bit as much
as God loves the people of Florida.

With all that in mind, on Saturday in the early afternoon I wrote my third draft,
happy I was done well ahead of time.

I saved it as final, then went to a meeting and on to Celtic Kirk.

Just like Dorian, the path of my sermon was to change dramatically.

In fact, I don't know why I bother writing sermons ahead of time.

It seems like every other Saturday afternoon, there's yet another shooting,
yet another young white man taking others' lives into his hands.

Not again! What am I going to say this time?

If I ignore the news and go with the sermon I've already written,
then I'm ignoring real life.

Faith has to deal with real life, or it's just pie in the sky.

The thing is, in the years I've been here –

and today is the 9th anniversary of when I began to serve Good Shepherd –
I've had 18 – YES, 18 – “opportunities” to give the word of the Lord
after an incident of gun violence. The average is twice a year,
but this is at least my fourth “opportunity” just this year,
and the second time in 3 weeks. What more can I possibly say?

I don't think the word from the Lord has changed a lick since my first sermon
after a mass shooting back in 2011,

but the utter mystery is that Americans haven't changed, either.

No matter how badly the violence has escalated, we just sit here.

In our Gospel today, Jesus asks which of two sons did the will of the father:
the one who didn't want to do the work but thought better of his decision
and went out and did it?

or the one that paid lip service to his father and sat on his behind
doing nothing at all?

I hear adults griping about how God's been taken out of our schools,
but ask those same adults to put God's will into figuring out what to do
in this country's relentless acceleration of gun violence,
and I don't get quotes from the Bible, but from our Constitution.

Our dedication to our rights over and above everyone and everything else
isn't a legal issue for Americans. The law is clear enough.

This is a spiritual issue for Americans.

What are we building here?

A society whose foundation begins and ends only with individual rights?

Or a society that begins with the love of God, neighbor, and then self?

Which one is the will of our Father?

We don't yet know much about our neighbors who were shot in Texas;
 one of those killed was a young student,
 one of those injured was a toddler, merely 17 months old;
 both were innocent lives whose families' worlds have been blown apart. One, forever.
 Three of our injured neighbors were first responders, and one was a postal carrier.
 The cops and the postal carrier are just like the common, ordinary workers
 in the lesson from Sirach: people who work, day in, day out, even at night,
 to make life better for others, people who don't even know their names.
 They were building on the foundation of our human society
 with the golden materials of service to others.
 Certainly, in serving others they were doing the will of the Father.
 It's the kind of work all people are called to do in God's vineyard.
 I am very grateful for their labor.

Paul assures us that God will reward this work.

How does our society repay their service to us?

Our society repays them by putting them – and all the rest of us –
 in the crosshairs of firearms, our rights more important than our neighbors' lives.
 Is that building on Christ's foundation with gold? or with grass?

Once again, I know some of you don't agree with me.

OK. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it's God's will that we live in this violent society.

Either way, I love you, my neighbor, even if we disagree on this.

I certainly don't think that I'm an embodiment of the first son,
 and that those who disagree with me are the second son.

For one thing, I know that I've got plenty of the second son in me;
 the list of ways I sit on my behind and don't do the Father's will
 is long enough that I won't hold myself up as a paragon of anything.

Well, unlike the first three drafts, this sermon WAS written at the last minute.

The culmination of this long, frustrating, weird, and heartbreaking week,
 was a nearly sleepless night.

At times like this (and there have been too many)

there's only one way forward for me to be a person of faith,
 to keep my focus on God's kingdom through it all: to give thanks.

I'm grateful for this community here today, each and every one of you.

I'm thankful for God's invitation to all of us to gather as one,
 not because we agree, but because we are all children of God.

On Labor Day, remember that the same God

calls us all to work together in the divine vineyard, and we all have the same job,
 though we'll do it in billions of different ways: our job is to work and pray side by side
 and be a blessing to each other and to the world.

As I've said to you at least 18 times, in our angry, self-centered culture,
 this labor is extraordinarily difficult,
 but the retirement benefits are out of this world.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

O God, you resist those who are proud and give grace to those who are humble. Give us the humility of your Son, that we may embody the generosity of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

SIRACH 38:27–32A

So it is also with every craftsperson and master artisan who carries over the day's work into the night, who carves figures on seals and works diligently to make diverse ornamentations. They will devote themselves to producing a lifelike painting, and they lose sleep in order to finish their work.

So it is with smiths who sit near an anvil and who closely examine works of iron. The blast of the fire will melt their flesh, and they will struggle with the heat of the furnace. The sound of the hammer will strike their ears again and again, and their eyes are focused on the pattern of the object. They will devote themselves to finishing the work, and they lose sleep in order to complete its decoration.

So it is with potters sitting at their work, turning the wheel at their feet. They lie down always feeling anxiety about their work, and every product of theirs is valued. They will mold the clay with their hands and work the wheel with their feet. They will devote themselves to finishing the glazing, and they lose sleep in order to clean the kiln.

All of these have relied on their hands, and each one is skilled in their work. Without them a city can't be inhabited, and they neither go abroad to live as immigrants nor travel about.

PSALM 90:12-17

So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Return, O lord; how long will you tarry? be gracious to your servants.

Satisfy us by your loving-kindness in the morning; so shall we rejoice and be glad all the days of our life.

**Make us glad by the measure of the days that you afflicted us
and the years in which we suffered adversity.**

Show your servants your works and your splendor to their children.

**May the graciousness of the lord our God be upon us;
prosper the work of our hands; prosper our handiwork.**

1 CORINTHIANS 3:10–14

I laid a foundation like a wise master builder according to God's grace that was given to me, but someone else is building on top of it. Each person needs to pay attention to the way they build on it. No one can lay any other foundation besides the one that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ. So, whether someone builds on top of the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, or hay, each one's work will be clearly shown. The day will make it clear, because it will be revealed with fire—the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If anyone's work survives, they'll get a reward.

MATTHEW 21:28–32

[Jesus said,] "What do you think? A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

"'No, I don't want to,' he replied. But later he changed his mind and went.

"The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied, 'Yes, sir.' But he didn't go.

"Which one of these two did his father's will?"

They said, "The first one."

Jesus said to them, "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you. For John came to you on the righteous road, and you didn't believe him. But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. Yet even after you saw this, you didn't change your hearts and lives and you didn't believe him.

SERMON HYMN: *Let Your Vineyard Be Fruitful, Lord*

BLESSING: Beloved, life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us, so be quick to love and make haste to be kind. As you leave this place, the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be upon you and remain with you, now and forever.