

Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we consider our commitment to "encourage one another toward responsible discipleship, knowing that the integrity of our faith is manifest in the way we treat others inside and outside the church."

Three Sundays ago our quiet afternoon with our Seattle family was interrupted with a telephone call from a close friend of our son's family. "Isn't your parent's church in Knoxville?" she asked. She then went on to give what skimpy details were available on the news at that point of a church shooting. Our grandson went on the internet and pulled up an article, which at least identified the church and related some brief information. As we followed the story from a distance and a couple of days later from home, we were struck with sadness that yet again our community and our nation were staggering to make sense of the senseless.

How often that has been the case. A young boy brings a gun to school and on discovery, wounds and takes the life of those who have spent almost every waking moment seeking to help him and the other children in his school. A sick man takes a gun into the pristine countryside of Pennsylvania Dutch country, snuffing out the lives of five Amish children and injuring five more. A respected scientist becomes the primary suspect in the anthrax scare that followed 9/11—one suggested motivation being his anger at Catholic Senators who had strayed from a pro-life agenda. Year after year violence takes its toll on both our nation's criminal justice and healthcare systems, firearms injuries, according to the Center for Disease Control, being a leading cause of death, particularly among youth.

In the space of one brief worship service and sermon, we might content ourselves with a "tsk, tsk" and go on our way except for the fact that the rage that boils over on occasion out there raises its ugly head at so many other points closer to home. The danger that, in the words of Charles Kimball, religion can become "evil" compels us to look more carefully at how we practice our faith—and how we practice our politics. We may not have experienced a gunman in our worship services or ever feel that we would ourselves inflict that sort of violence on anyone. All of us, however, have been in situations where religious faith and political bias have become lethal, destroying reputations, community and mission.

In our Covenant of Grace we have committed ourselves to acting toward one another as God in Christ has acted toward us: "We covenant to love one another as God in Christ has loved us." And we have acknowledged that "the integrity of our faith is manifest in the way we treat others inside and outside the church." Our calling is to build a different sort of community—not just a feel good community of safety and isolation, but a community that by the way it lives its life within and the influence it seeks to bear in the broader community and world will bear witness to the God we serve. Significantly, our commitment is not just a matter of strategy. It is about getting back to the basics.

We are called to live out our baptism. In *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Will Campbell tells about attending a conference on Religion and Race in Chicago at the height of the civil rights movement. William Stringfellow began his address to the conferees with the words, "The issue, the only *issue*, at this conference is baptism." The critical issue for the people of faith gathered in that room was not whether they were Democrats or Republicans, Southerners or Northerners, Black or White. The critical issue was about whether a people who went by the name Christian would stand up in their churches, communities and nation and *be* Christian.

The Epistle to the Colossians is addressed to a people drowning in a culture of corruption and vice. The writer calls those early Christians and us to remember and live out of our baptism in Christ. "When you were buried with [Christ] in baptism," he reminds them, "you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col.2:12). Or, as Paul puts it in Romans, "We have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death [and raised to] walk in newness of life (6:4). "If you have been raised with Christ," the writer to the Colossians continues, "seek the things that are above" (3:1). He proceeds, then, to name attitudes and behaviors of the old way of life that must be stripped off in order to make way for the new "clothing" that Christ gives.

The earliest descriptions of baptism outside the New Testament describe a fascinating ritual. Baptismal candidates fasted as an act of repentance before baptism and were called upon to renounce the devil and all evil ways. Before entering the water for baptism, their old clothing was cast off as a sign of casting off their old way of life. After being immersed three times in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, they were handed a new white robe, symbolizing that in baptism we put on Christ.

Being raised with Christ is not just about acknowledging a past event or looking forward to a future secure in Christ. It is about the here and now. Baptized people live by the resurrection. After we have buried our old way of life, we are raised to new life. Baptism changes everything: what we live for and what we are willing to die for, how we relate to one another and how we come to see those we have labeled as "outsider" or "enemy." Baptism signals a whole new world.

We are called to build community. Some years ago I accompanied our youth group in Louisville on a mission trip to suburban Cleveland, Ohio. We spent the week sleeping in a church basement and conducting a Vacation Bible School in the mornings and performing dramas we had prepared over the previous year in the evenings. I recall one evening as we were falling to sleep the group quietly singing in the darkness, “It only takes a spark to get a fire glowing.” As the youth reflected on gratifying experiences from their week together and anticipated the possible far-reaching effects of what they had done, hope was high.

Over the years, I have experienced some sense of gratification in having participated in planting a sense of expectation and hope in young lives concerning the significance their lives can have and the difference their lives can make. I have also, however, also had to come to recognize that just as a spark can light a warm fire of love and peace in the world, it can also ignite a blaze of destruction. We all can acknowledge the wisdom of the Epistle of James that speaks to the tongue’s potential for unleashing a conflagration of destruction (3:5). How often we have seen words of hatred whip people into a fit of rage. Whether those words are leveled from the pulpit or the campaign platform or in the schoolyard, the results can be devastating both for targeted individuals and groups and for a society that nurtures and protects its prejudices.

Despite our tendency to see Scripture as having emerged from never-never land, Colossians and the Bible itself are far from living in a dream world. A brief glimpse at the behaviors that must be put aside—a list of sexual sins (which we tend to attribute to those other guys), greed (that’s getting closer to home, although we don’t want to talk about it) and anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language (ouch! right where we live). These are realities that plague church, family and community, and if not carefully handled can come to dominate and destroy relationship.

Here are the tools, on the other hand, for building community: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace and a thankful heart. “In other words,” the writer of Colossians says to us, “Take upon yourselves the attributes elsewhere attributed to God and Christ. Live like that.”

Feel overwhelmed with the idea of transplanting just that type of reality in the midst of the realities which parade across our TV screens every night? Feel like there’s no way we can change the world? Sociologist Robert Bella suggests that “if a small segment of a society—perhaps as few as two percent—shares a vision of what that society can become, they can change their world.”

How about you? Do you believe it? In the words of Colossians, “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Or, as our Grace Covenant puts it, “The integrity of our faith is manifest in the way we treat others inside and outside the church.”