

See or Be Seen

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
November 5, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
3rd Sunday of Stewardship Season
Text: Matthew 23:1-5a

David Brooks wrote an excellent opinion piece in the *New York Times* this past Thursday. Entitled “How to Stay Sane in Brutalizing Times,” he explores two different ancient approaches on this very topic so much on our minds and hearts as war rumbles on two continents, violence stalks our streets and government dysfunction in the name of ideology threatens to paralyze our entire country. These are indeed brutalizing times, and it can be a real struggle to remain positive on any given day. I admit I was drawn in by the title of this piece, but once I began reading it, I was intrigued by Brooks’ arguments which are drawn from the ancient Greeks and the Abrahamic faiths. I was so impressed by this article that I posted it to my Facebook page so you can find it there if you want to read it. I’ve also made a few copies which I will leave up here on the Pastor’s Table. But allow me to begin today by briefly summarizing Brooks’ key points.

He begins with an analysis of the ancient Greeks who, he reminds us, “knew about violent times.”¹ In response the Greeks developed what he calls “a tragic sensibility” which he says “begins with an awareness that the crust of civilization is thin. Breakdowns into barbarism are the historical norm.”² Once you accept this reality, he says, you have to decide if you will just refuse to think about these bad things hoping they never happen or decide to confront this reality and figure out a way to thrive in your life anyway. He goes on to

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/02/opinion/sunday/resilience-bad-news-coping.html>

² Ibid.

outline several ways in which this tragic sensibility helps us to cope in these “brutalizing times.” These include:

- 1) Developing a sense of humility which he defines as seeing yourself as you truly are;
- 2) Nurturing the ability to focus on the downsides of your own actions and work to head them off;
- 3) Encouraging caution because “the price we pay for our errors is higher than the benefits we gain from our successes;”
- 4) Learning to be suspicious of your own rage because it convinces you too easily of your own righteousness at the expense of the humanity of others;
- 5) Searching for common humanity through the harsh realities of individual suffering thrust in our faces by the unrelenting media.³

Failure to pay attention to these factors, Brooks says, is what allows dehumanization to creep into the way we look at people. This in turn allows us, encourages us, to see them as “less than.” Less than what? Less than we are, something we know as Christians is just not true and never has been, as much as we might sometimes act as though it is. He then argues that

“the core counterattack against this kind of dehumanization is to offer others the gift of being seen. What sunlight is to the vampire, recognition is to the dehumanizers. We fight back by opening our hearts and casting a just and loving attention on others, by being curious about strangers, being a little too vulnerable with them in the hopes that they might be vulnerable too.”⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

This, he argues, is something any of us can do in our daily lives. This is how we make a difference. This is how we try to make our own lives better, more livable and more enjoyable and it starts with bringing our own attention away from ourselves and focusing instead on what he calls “the mentality that emerged among the great Abrahamic faiths This mentality celebrates an audacious act: The act of leading with love in harsh times.”⁵ It is this response to the brutalizing reality we face each day that allows us to survive and even thrive in the midst of so much that is so awful. He concludes by noting that this is “not a call to naivete’” acknowledging that there are some who will never respond to this approach because evil is too much in their core. But he challenges us to realize most people are nice folks who just get caught up in bad situations. As we engage with these folks, he says, we need to “see people with generous eyes, offering trust ... before they trust you. ... [Looking] at people with a respectful attitude” which will allow you to see that they are the same as you, “imperfect people enmeshed in uncertainty, doing the best they can.”⁶

How extraordinary that such an article as this appeared in the *New York Times*! That alone gives me so much hope because, dear ones, what David Brooks is describing is the exact way Jesus invites us to live life each day as people beloved of God who love each other because we know what it is to be loved. This is our call as the people who claim to follow Jesus. This is what everything we learn from Jesus is teaching us. What is different, and unique about Brooks’ approach is that by beginning his analysis with a look at Greek tragedy, his starting point is not the typical Pollyanna “sunshine is just

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

around the corner so let's hurry up and get to it." Instead Brooks begins with a focus on the darkness we feel threatens us each day. Face the darkness head on, that's where we begin, he argues. Only by looking at the problems directly and unflinchingly can we hope to truly see them and, more importantly, see how we can adjust our thinking and our response accordingly.

This is what Jesus is doing in the story we read from the Gospel of Matthew this morning. Jesus is using the contemporary religious authorities that his disciples and the people he was speaking to would have known very well as the example of what was wrong with how the people were trying to live life as God wanted. "Do what they (the religious leaders) teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do because they do not practice what they teach." See them as they really are, Jesus is saying, just like Brooks is saying that we need to see the people around us as they really are – the good, the bad, the confused, the fearful. See them, trust that they are good people like you who may just see the world a little differently. See what's really there or be seen judging without thought or regard for the humanity of others. This is the choice that confronts us each day.

I would be remiss, however, if I concluded without using this particular Scripture text to provide a little insight into how important Brooks' words are in these days of rising anti-Semitism. You may have noticed that whenever I reference these and other New Testament texts, I always refer to the people Jesus is criticizing as "the religious authorities" rather than as "the scribes and Pharisees." With today's text I even went a step farther by omitting the entire second half of verse 5. The full verse says, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others; *for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.*" Now why do you think I omitted the second half of that verse? (*Pause for responses*). Simple. The names the text gives to the

religious authorities and the descriptions of the phylacteries and the fringes are things which could only be ascribed to Jews practicing their faith. The phylacteries are the small wooden prayer boxes which males attach to their bodies with straps while praying. The fringes are the fringes of the prayer shawls which Jewish males also wear while praying. They are to wear them all the time, even when not praying, so the fringes of the prayer shawls can be visible underneath their street clothes. This was true in Jesus' time and is still true today.

This matters because, on the surface, this is a text which has Jesus – *JESUS* – being highly critical of Jews. Jesus is identifying the Jews as a problem! And these sorts of texts can be found throughout the Gospels and many of the other New Testament writings. Jews are identified over and over again as being at odds with Jesus in these texts which are read routinely in Christian services and taught in Christian Sunday Schools. These texts we so often read in worship without a second thought are telling us over and over again that Jews are a problem. So, why are we then surprised that anti-Semitism has been such an issue over the millennia and is once again becoming a problem too big to ignore? Even progressive Christian churches like ours seldom pause to point out this obvious issue in our teaching and preaching. Add to this the numerous conservative evangelical Christian churches which teach and preach these Christian scriptures in a way that is overtly anti-Semitic when they conflate the religious authorities Jesus was trying to reform with all Jews everywhere throughout time. Too often we are just oblivious to these anti-Semitic overtones in our Bible study and our worship. We've heard these texts so often we don't really even notice those parts, those words. At least we don't think we do. But, subconsciously we do. We don't mean to. We don't even know we're doing it. But we are constantly absorbing this subtle subtext all the time and the impact of this is that when our

Jewish brothers and sisters are victims of anti-Semitism, as they have been recently, it is just too easy to look the other way.

Case in point, Harvard Divinity School is one of the most progressive divinity schools in the world, never mind the United States. Yet, I was personally appalled by Harvard's response to the horrific anti-Semitic chants and posters which were all over the pro-Palestinian protests on campus when the war in Gaza broke out. Anti-Semitic incidents on college campuses, even Harvard and the other Ivies, as well as in local communities have seen an unbelievable upswing in recent months and it is terrifying to me, and to every Jew I know. Dear ones, it should be terrifying to all of us. What does it say about us if we are *not* outraged? We need to recognize, to understand to our very core, that we can be outraged by the injustices faced by the Palestinians in Gaza AND by the horrific slaughter of Israelis on October. We can be horrified by the suffering of the Palestinians as the war rages on AND also be horrified by the anti-Semitic attacks on our Jewish brothers and sisters happening around the world. The people of the Jewish faith and the political state of Israel are two separate things. As David Brooks reminds us, we must do the hard work of pausing to understand this conflation of the two which I would argue is itself evil and even sinful. Being outraged by anti-Semitism rampant everywhere and being outraged by the injustices the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank have suffered for too long are not mutually exclusive. This is not a binary choice, with one or the other totally right and the other totally wrong. We must see the truth in front of us in this awful situation AND we must be seen as understanding it so that we can lead others through our example.

Dear ones, this "see and be seen" approach is absolutely critical in this brutal world we live in. We must find within ourselves, within our own loving and supportive church family, the courage to see the

problems threatening to overwhelm us and be seen as people committed to leading with love and justice for all as the centerpiece to how we approach life. See and be seen. Dare to confront the negativities within ourselves so that we can work to overcome them. Dare to lead with love and justice for all as the foundation for how we live our lives each day. Work at being humble, at proceeding cautiously as we seek to understand challenging situations, and at controlling our rage when brutality flashes across our television screens. Only then will we not fall to pray to the temptation to dehumanize those portrayed as villains in the situation we are witnessing, whatever it is.

Is this easy or simple to do. Of course not! Is it absolutely essential if we are to live fully into God's call to each of us to love the other as we love ourselves? Yes. Yes, it is. May God give us strength for the living of these days. May God grant us the ability to see the truth hidden under layers of confusion. May God grant us the strength to hear the cries of all God's people over the shouts of rage from those whose claims to victimhood ring hollow. May God fill our hearts with love for those forced to bear the heavy burdens that others have placed upon them with no thought of their welfare. May God let us see them, fully and completely and let them know they have been seen by us and that somehow, some way, we have their backs in whatever way might be possible.

See and be seen. May these words become the guardrails of our lives during these fragile and brutal times. Amen.