

## **Meg's Sermon for 2/19/17**

A few weeks ago, as I was searching for how to begin this sermon, I got very nervous. I didn't know how to share my own beliefs without offending anyone else's, but more importantly, I didn't know what to say about the fear and frustration that I am sure weighs down on many of you as well. For people like me who are privileged to live without such fear most days, this weight is much more prevalent than usual, for others, it is a burden adding to constant uncertainty of their safety in this country.

In order to face this fear with all its different faces, and be able to speak about it with some hope for the future, I turned not to the Bible or to the News, but to a story that has kept me company for over a decade: Harry Potter.

I started the *Harry Potter* series in second grade, and learned alongside Harry as he mastered transfiguration, played quidditch, and fought Voldemort. At first, I feared Voldemort simply because the books told me to. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and their classmates had been told he was evil and power hungry, and because that is what they believed, I took it in as the truth. In later books, it was revealed that Voldemort's weakness, and eventually his downfall, was that he lacked love.

He could not create it nor receive it, and this made him truly alone and hopeless. While *Harry Potter* is often considered

a children's series, I would argue that it teaches us some of the most complex and essential lessons on how we might lead fulfilling lives. The most obvious and important of these lessons is that love gives us strength.

This call for compassion is also a common thread in each of our readings and prayers for today. I do not know if this is a Godly call or a human call, or if it is possible for it to be both, but this call for us to spread love, light, and support could not be coming at a better time. To me, the work of love that the scriptures describes is one meant to bring us closer to God and to each other. It is a disciplined practice that requires hard work, and a willingness to empathize with strangers.

Loving people we already know and care for is much easier than loving strangers, or even — as Jesus suggested in the Gospel — loving enemies. I think that oftentimes we can get so caught up in stereotypes that we forget who enemies are: Are they someone who would cause harm, or someone I fear only because I assume they'd want to hurt me? I have been working recently to differentiate the two in my head, and to make sure I am not calling others enemies when they are actually people I don't fully understand or know yet.

A lot of the bravery required in loving your enemies goes into the willingness to start conversations with them and

understand their views. Here at church, we are blessed with the time, patience, and opportunity to learn from each other through both difficult and light-hearted conversation.

Last fall, a small group started our monthly Racial Justice and Reconciliation Meetings, which have allowed me the honor of sharing about myself while listening to the perspectives and stories of other St. Andrew's Parishioners and Greensboro community members. My favorite memories from these monthly meetings have been moments where someone has told their story and revealed a truth about their life or asked a question that pushed the other attendees out of our comfort zones. On the days I was there, attendance at these events was predominantly white, and it was an honor for me to learn, and watch others learn from the perspectives of people of color, to question how we, as people of privilege on many levels, might be allies in racial justice.

I believe that attending these meetings has been a wonderful gift for many of us at St. Andrews, because we have taken the great risk of sharing ourselves, and questioning how our lives might fit together even though we stand along divisive lines.

In his letters to the Corinthians, which we read from earlier, Paul wrote that, “you should become fools so you might become

wise.” He calls for this questioning of the self in a very different context, one where the problems of the world and the concerns of God cannot matter at the same time. For us today, I believe that the issues facing our world are ones of both morality and ethics, of both this life and the next. Paul’s letter is a reminder that we should never stop asking questions, never stop evolving our sense of what is right and wrong in our society.

Continuing to question ourselves, as individuals defined by both Christianity and citizenry, is becoming more and more important, as our country continues to reveal the true depth of its conflict and polarity — depths which some of us have the fortune of not having seen before this past year’s election.

We are called to deepen our compassion, not just for ourselves and our neighbors, but for those who seem to be completely different from us. We do our own causes and passions no justice by simply invalidating their’s, and I do think it is possible to learn from people who might be called “enemies.”

We can certainly try to understand them without losing an overall goal of justice — whatever sort of justice it is you seek in your life. Compassion requires uncomfortable conversation, the sort of conversation where you can listen to all the perspectives of an issue before deciding how to respond.

I do not think that conversations like these — like the ones present at Racial Reconciliation meetings or protests of the travel ban on people from Muslim-majority countries — will ever be finished. As we stand up for the rights of those more vulnerable than ourselves, or for the rights of a vulnerable group we are a part of, I have found that open-minded love and support is the best way to stay strong in our understanding of why we continue the work we are doing.

I am not trying to say that compassion fixes every conflict our community is facing, and every problem groups have created for themselves. To say that would be naive, and would not give any attention to how ingrained and nuanced our nation's struggle to reach justice is for many of its people. However, I believe that compassion, and especially compassion created through conversation is a very good start. It allows us to see each other in the way God wants us to, as equals, neighbors, and partners in making the world into what God has shown us it can be. That is how reconciliation — how change — begins.