

The Social Witness Committee preached this morning. This is my introduction to their sermon with a first paragraph written in response to the murders at Tree of Life Congregation on Saturday.

The Reformed Imperative
Matthew 25:31-40

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry...thirsty...a stranger...naked...in prison...and you....”

I imagine Jesus adding to these few verses in Matthew this morning, “When I was in the crosshairs of human hatred, you sheltered me.” The Tree of Life Congregation is in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh. It was Fred Rogers’ real neighborhood. If you have seen the recent movie on his life, you will remember him saying, “When I was a little boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” Isn’t that what Jesus was saying about the saints he will welcome into God’s love when he comes in glory? In every instance, they were the helpers who helped God’s most vulnerable children. “All Jews must die,” the shooter shouted as he shot his AK15 into a congregation like this congregation and the helpers ran toward him. “Why hello there HIAS!” the shooter posted, referring to Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society with whom we will be working and for whom we are praying this morning. “You like to bring in hostile invaders to dwell among us...that kill our people? I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I’m going in.” And he did. HIAS are the helpers, helping those whom the world and apparently this nation of immigrants now despises, the helpers of whom Jesus will say when he comes in his glory, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, in prison and you helped me.”

If sometime in the last twenty-three years you asked me what you could do to have a closer relationship with God, chances are I did not respond by handing you a book on “Improving Your Prayer Life.” Instead, as a minister steeped from childhood in the Reformed theological tradition, I probably invited you to spend a Saturday working with Habitat or a night sleeping with the guests of Philadelphia Interfaith Housing Network or a morning reading to children at Freedom School or a day chopping vegetables and serving meals at Face to Face. In the words of Nicholai Berdyaev, “The question of bread for myself is a material question. The question of bread for my neighbor is a spiritual question.” Presbyterians are Matthew 25 Christians. It is our Reformed imperative.

Over against the medieval monastic tradition that believed a human being’s highest calling was the contemplation of God, the Reformers believed that obedience to God’s will in the world was the highest human calling. They believed that God was in the world picking up the pieces and that the followers of Jesus were to spend their lives, literally, asking how they could be about God’s work in the world. To say with the reformers this morning that we are a part of the priesthood of all believers is not to say, as many think, that each of us has a direct pipeline to God without Rome or the saints. It is to acknowledge in these mean and dangerous times that each of us is to be a priest to the other, representing Christ to the other, seeing Christ in the other.