

“Be Vigilant”

Sermon my Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 8/11/19

Luke 12:32-40

As many of you know, I was born and raised in Oklahoma. My wife Ruth was born and raised in El Paso, Texas. El Paso is about a ten hours' drive from my hometown of Lawton, OK. This area was once on the very outskirts of what was the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, my own tribe's land acquired by treaties, but eventually given over to the Federal soldiers in the later 1800's who then called the area Fort Sill, a newly created internment camp for the most unruly of plains Indians who were being brought into the prison camp in chains, the most famous of whom you will all easily recognize, the great Chiricahua Apache chief Geronimo. I bring up Geronimo because he and his people are the bridge between El Paso and Lawton, between Ruth's and my own home places. Ruth was born and raised among a community of people descending from the Manso, Suma, Jumano, and Tigua tribes, and like her own ancestors of other Uto-Azteca tribes of Northern Mexico, as well as the Apache Mescalero (our connecting tribe). I was born and then raised among the descendants of the Comanche, Kiowa and then those from the larger tribes of Oklahoma – Choctaws like me and the Cherokees, but also and most importantly to this story—the Apaches.

Not far from Ruth's home, the Apache Mescalero were a large tribe consisting of smaller bands of Apaches—including Geronimo's own band of Chiricahua. They roamed the areas of El Paso and the river valley and all of New Mexico and Arizona. They fought against the colonizers who had killed Geronimo's mother, wife, and children— he fought both the Mexican and American federal soldiers, and became a legend with his many escapes from the hands of his enemies. By the mid-1800s his renown was such that he came to symbolize what many tribes like even my own longed for, a resilient spirit to keep resisting and remaining independent and free from an invading force. However, Geronimo himself knew he couldn't continue to lead his people through the deserts and mountains forever, constantly on the run from the foreign armies that consistently pursued him.

My people had been forced onto the Trail of Tears in 1831 (two years after Geronimo had been born), and relocated from Mississippi to Oklahoma. But El Paso had become an agricultural settlement even earlier, dating back to the 1500s when the Spanish arrived there, building the first missions in what would later become the United States. These tribes there had formed a cooperative and created a community of farmers in the green valley surrounded by high desert hundreds of years before most tribes would need to do the same for survival. So, Geronimo surrendered to American soldiers in 1886. His tribe was eventually relocated from their freedom and native lands near Ruth's home to mine, the prisoner camp now known as Lawton, Oklahoma. It is hard to believe the place I call home was a prison for conquered peoples, independent thinkers, nonconformists, and the indigenous tribes of this continent. It is hard to believe that Ruth's home was part of the native lands of Geronimo's nomadic tribe and my home was their prison. Each of our hometowns representing their beginning and their end. One their freedom and the other their captivity. Our homelands symbolizing the two sides of a very strange and often painful coin, a story we too often forget in this country.

However, when the killer honed in on El Paso as his target a week ago, a place for reasons we cannot understand, he chose one of the oldest, continuous communities in what we fondly call America. A place that has survived the nations that have owned it during its many centuries of existence: Spain, Mexico,

New Mexico, the Republic of Texas, and the United States. A community that has lived in peace and harmony, cooperating for survival, undeterred by war and mayhem, and once again finds itself in the middle of political absurdity. It is the original El Paso del Norte (gateway to the North), straddling two sides of a major river that gives life to two countries with its abundance of essential fruits and vegetables, and it always has: A peace-loving, generous people-- the native inhabitants of this sacred land we all collectively call home.

Ruth's and my homes represent two essences of what how we treat one another in this life: Her home represents the beauty of love and forgiveness, and finding a peaceful existence together while mine represented the subjugation of less-thans. But the killer did not choose my native Oklahoma, which was much closer, because its painful history is too complex surely; instead he chose the one community that symbolizes true freedom and love, a peace that he cannot begin to understand. He chose to disrupt the native peoples that have survived the longest in the same place since the conquerors came 500 years ago. He chose El Paso, which means the "the way" or "the gate." But like Geronimo's story tells us, there is a spirit in all of us to survive... to move on, and stay intact as a people. He chose to see out the rest of his days in my hometown with his families by his side. However, he always longed to get back to the lands of his ancestors, and even in his dying breaths regretted surrendering in the first place. After his death, some did escape and return to live among the Apache Mescalero near Ruth's hometown of El Paso. And some stayed in my hometown, and I grew up with their descendants. Regardless of where they ended up, though, Geronimo's people somehow survived. And El Paso will survive this. But we must remain vigilant.

There is a hate that consumes us, and an ideology that threatens our peaceful co-existence—don't let it take root, even for a second. And please try and refrain from utilizing political terms as you face it. That will only polarize people further away from each other. Instead approach life from a moral perspective of love your neighbor, or hate your neighbor. I believe you can only have one or the other. There is really nothing in the middle. And in our vigilance, instead of waiting for God to return to the earth, we must understand that God is here, in you and me. We are the light, we are the city on the hill whose light gives hope. Do not let your light burn out. Do not give up. Do not become cold and indifferent. Do not fall into political traps of alienation and hostility. Be the light! Be the loving neighbor. Be a peacemaker. Be El Paso!

Shalom