

“A Sanctuary of What?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA, 1/19/2020

This has been a tumultuous week for some of us who have found ourselves thrown into the processes of mutual understanding when it comes to concerns of justice and equality, love and fear. As I walked into the EC Glass auditorium Tuesday evening, just after just coming over from the LCS school board meeting where parents of LGBTQ students were concerned about having their graduation ceremonies at an institution here in town that has vocally condemned people who are nonconforming with mainstream cyst-gender heterosexuality and gender identity, this after the board decided to table the vote for the amendment to their non-discrimination policy to include LGBTQ kids, and then to now be barraged with people seemingly concerned that their guns were being removed from them, I could not help but notice the seemingly prevailing demographic of these clearly afraid citizens. It was disheartening. I was greatly alarmed personally, and it affected me greatly. Why so much fear? I juxtaposed the scene with what this same auditorium would have looked like 58 years earlier when Dr. King came to speak, hoping to encourage Lynchburg to fully desegregate. He’s already seen how the sit-ins and swim-ins had not succeeded to fully strip away vestiges of apartheid, systemic racial policy, also known as Jim Crow laws and traditions. And to know that tens of thousands of the same and similar folk will march on Richmond tomorrow, on the day we celebrate and honor the courage of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I am dumbfounded. I must breathe. Maybe we all just need to catch our breath. I was further perplexed when a Christian leader who leads the same institution of controversy decided to encourage citizens to emulate the Civil Rights Movement by enacting “civil disobedience” throughout the state if the state legislature tries to regulate their guns. He also encouraged cities and governments to do the same, including his own city government of Lynchburg—our city government. He encouraged us to be a “sanctuary city” to respect our culture here. After heated, impassioned pleas from citizens who were clearly alarmed and afraid they would lose their guns on Tuesday night, our city counsel decided not to become such a “sanctuary city.”

The word “sanctuary” we use in this context has its roots in the French word “*saintuaire*” which in the Middle Ages became distinctly tied to providing safe harbor or protection for those needing asylum, fleeing some grave danger and needing “sanctuary.” Of course this term up until very recently was tied to cities in the US who protected their immigrant population by not actively seeking out and deporting “undocumented” residents. These were known as “sanctuary cities.” However, this term has been recently co-opted to now incorporate people who want their city to protect citizens rights to own and procure guns as they feel accorded by the 2nd Amendment of the Constitution. I do not bring this up in order to debate legalities and the ethical nature of owning and using such weapons, and I encourage us today, to instead focus on what it means to be a “sanctuary” for something.

If you were going to have your name etched into something for the next thousand years, and your descendants will see your name attached to something forever... my question to you is: What would it be? If you were to be tied as to providing sanctuary for something or someone or someones, what would it be? –Dan Harrison, a sanctuary for “fill in the blank.” What would it be? Think about it. This has nothing to do with anyone else. This is not a referendum on what happened Tuesday or what is happening in Richmond tomorrow. This is not a political act. This is you arriving to some conclusion about yourself.

Normally, this would be a rhetorical exercise. But today, I am going to ask you to personally wrestle with this. We will take a moment of silence. I will hand out pieces of paper and some pens. I want you to write it down. Write down your name and then what you desire to personally be a sanctuary for. Dan, a sanctuary for _____. During our time of silence, I hope you will arrive to something. And if not, I hope it hits you this coming week, this coming month, or sometime soon— this is between you and God, and it is serious. I want you to treat it seriously.

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Now, I will move from introspection to a more collective examination of ourselves. What do we envision our community of faith to be tied to? To be known for, to provide for others who seek it. What are we to be in the grand scheme things, together? When people hear the words Church of the Covenant, what do we want them to attach to us? Think about it. What are we a sanctuary for? Besides respecting the journeys of all, and loving one another, what do we want to be a sanctuary of? This is the challenge, moving from self to other, from individual to group. But this is how we shape the mission. God has prepared us for this moment. What are we to be in 2020. What are we to be a sanctuary of?

Shalom