

The Long Week

Text: Galatians 5:22-23

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on January 24, 2021

Between now and Easter we're going to be focused on a combination of the fruits of the Spirit as Paul details them in Galatians 5 and the spiritual disciplines, a traditional focus during Lent which will start in just a few weeks. To kick that off, I want to talk about the best Sunday of my ministry to date, which happened in Dover, NH on November 2, 2003.

Just over a week before, the church was contacted by the Dover police department to say they had just given a permit for the Westboro Baptist Church to picket our church. Identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group from Topeka, Kansas, Westboro is focused on an anti-LGBT agenda. They're best known for protesting at the funerals of US soldiers, rejoicing in their deaths which they believed are God's punishment on the country for tolerating homosexuality. One hallmark of the group is its hateful signs and the way that protestors get in people's faces and scream hate in the name of God.

The group is not known for violence, but one of their goals is to incite those they are protesting to respond to their vitriol with violence. Fred Phelps, the late Westboro leader and patriarch, was an attorney as were several other family members and if they could manage to provoke someone to take a swing at them, the lawsuit would be on your desk before they got back home. In winning those lawsuits, they would finance their next hate-filled trip.

The Dover police wanted to give us a heads up so we could do whatever we felt necessary to prepare for November 2. They were going to be picketing during the half hour between our two services so that they would get maximum exposure to those leaving the first service and those arriving for the second. As I spoke with individuals in the congregation, people were afraid. Families didn't want their children exposed to those signs. They were afraid of violence. They wondered if we should cancel church that week. The Sunday before, I presented our plan. First, we would have only one service instead of two and that one service would not be at either of the usual times. Instead we would straddle them both, so that we would be inside the building during the entire protest time.

Second, we covered our regular church sign with a large sign that said, "God is love," being sure to include the Scripture reference to remind the folks of Westboro that "God is love" is a Bible verse. Since they were not allowed to come onto the private property of the church, they would have to have their protest right next to our sign and driveway, putting our message of love in the midst of their message of hate.

Lastly, I printed up piles of 8.5 x 11 "God is love" signs for people to take. I encouraged people to take as many as they needed and to have them in their cars as they came to church the next week. That way if there was any sign of the protesters upon either coming or going, the children could hold the sign up in the car windows, with the "God is love" message facing out. That would both be our counter-protest message and would also serve to keep the kids from seeing the hateful signs. The sermon that Sunday before was focused on our core message: "God is love." We finished church, people took signs, and then we waited for the next week.

Coming to the present day for a moment, we talked here all fall about spiritual transformation and growth; and between now and Easter we're going to focus in on a combination of the fruit of the

Spirit and the spiritual disciplines. What I want to emphasize in my story about Dover is that for that congregation, there was no better exercise in spiritual development than the long, fretful week between those two Sundays.

The town of Dover, on the NH Seacoast, is relatively affluent and almost entirely white. The church itself is situated on a lovely river in a quiet neighborhood. The vast majority of the people in that church had never in their lives been forced to confront the question of whether it was physically safe to go to church. They had thought about that for other Christians in other places, but not for them. Not right there in Dover.

During that long week, they revisited all the things they previously imagined they might do if they were actually some of those persecuted Christians — whether that meant Christians in black churches under threat from white supremacists who might bomb or shoot them on a Sunday, or Christians in another part of the world or in the days of the early church where their faith was actually banned and punishable by death. Most comfortable folks in Dover had always seen themselves as the heroes, the ones who would have the courage to face it all. But was that true? Now they were considering staying home because of ugly signs and people shouting? There was soul searching. Families talked it through amongst themselves. As November 2 dawned, I had no idea what they would decide or what would happen.

When the hour approached, I had my answer. They came. They came in droves — the old, the young, the families with their children. They filled the church. There was standing room only. They not only had their “God is love” signs from the week before, many had made their own. Some had made huge “God is love” signs that went the length of their SUVs. Some told me that they drove out of their way to find where the group was going to be before coming to us so that they could hold up their “God is love” signs and make them see it.

We began the service and you could feel the energy in the congregation. At the end of the opening hymn the room erupted into cheers. They were pumped. That week going to church was not drudgery or duty. It wasn’t even comforting or soothing. That week going to church meant something in a way that it hadn’t before. They had spent the week confronting their fears and deciding whether to take an actual risk to go to church and stand for something bigger than themselves. And they won that battle with their fear. They faced down their fears with the love of God and love won. They had found their courage. They stood tall and proud and the cheer was for God, for themselves, and for the love of the world that almost melted the church walls.

The Westboro folks arrived on schedule. I had ushers watching for them in case they tried to come onto the church property. Once they realized we had thwarted their effort by changing the service time, they did come and head for the church doors, but the Dover police were right behind them and they were chased back up to the road. In the days and weeks that followed, we got tremendous support from the community and we left our church sign covered with the big “God is love” sign for many weeks. The church was stronger after that Sunday and remained so. There was less that rattled them and we were able to face down some other serious challenges with the confidence that we could meet those threats by remembering the day we felt God’s love manifest within each one of us as courage.

Another thing that Sunday made plain to me was how the infusion of meaning into our Sunday gathering eliminated the petty, small things that too many churches fight about. I did the unthinkable that week. I moved the time of both of the worship services. We blended the music and styles of worship and, with just a week's notice, everyone came at a different time, nobody had their favorite style of worship, and literally nobody cared. Nobody grumped that the service went too long; nobody gave the side-eye to someone sitting in *their* pew; nobody complained about the drums or the organ or fussed that we left out the Creed. That Sunday it became crystal clear that the core of our faith had nothing to do with any of that. Every person who showed up that morning knew why they were there and what they were standing for, and everything else faded from view.

I tell you that story because I think that we have been living through a long-form version of that time in Dover—the long week when all of us had to think about what going to church really meant and whether we were willing to give up things that were routine and comfortable and take some real risks in exchange for something that was bigger than ourselves. In our reality today, that week has now been almost a year—a year of asking ourselves, What is church really all about? Where do I find meaning? Is there a love big enough that will give me the courage to stand up for what I say I believe? Am I participating in something bigger than myself? Have I been worried about things that really don't matter? Do my priorities need to shift?

Hate groups of all kinds now march all around us. What does it mean to proclaim God's love in their midst? The fires of the pandemic and political turmoil still rage around us. Our fears surround us; the threat is real. The long week drags on. Now is when the spiritual fruit of our lives takes shape—or doesn't. Now is the time when we discover what we truly believe—or don't. We are still having the discussions around the kitchen table, still wondering what will happen and who will come when our year-long week is finished and our long-awaited Sunday arrives.

In the midst of that, I bring you good news. If we hold fast to the love of Christ; if we meet our fear with love; I have seen what that Sunday will look like. I have felt the power of worship infused with meaning and purpose. We are now struggling and huddled in our homes. The long week is not over. But the fruit is growing. Every time we meet hate with compassion, it ripens a little more; every time we speak the truth with love, it grows; every time we offer mercy instead of judgment, our branches strengthen. So that when that Sunday finally comes, we will know who and whose we are; we will know why we gather and why it matters; our love will manifest as courage and though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, we will not fear. Such is the power of love. Amen.