

Back in the 1960's, a television show began on the BBC known as "That Was the Week That Was," which then moved across the ocean to the US for a few years where it made a celebrity of one of its original BBC cast members, David Frost, perhaps best remembered for his interview of then former President Richard Nixon. TW3, as it became called, was a satirical comment on the prior week's news events, but the possibility of looking at the events of this past week with satire or sarcasm were pretty well obliterated by the horrible event in Charleston, South Carolina, a truly *evil* event in which nine worshippers at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina were murdered.

Before that horrible act, it appeared that the major news story might be that of a member of the Roman Catholic clergy — well, not just *a member*, but the Pope himself — wading into what appears, though less so on closer look, *political* territory. But I want to note instead (with, indeed, some sarcasm) that a relatively prominent Roman Catholic layman from political territory waded into, and attempted to pull religion into — an area where politics and religion may or may not overlap.

To be specific, scarcely half-a-day after the evil massacre of worshippers and before the the apparent murderer had been captured, former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum referred to

the act as having occurred in part because, “[W]e’re now seeing assaults on our religious liberty we’ve never seen before.”

Leave it to a politician not to wait until the evidence is in to open his or her mouth to utter an already held opinion, missing the mark so completely. Nonetheless, allow me at least to extract part of what I think Santorum *might* have meant, although possibly giving him credit for which he is not entitled, because my restatement will lead us to the two Scriptures we read a few moments ago. I think Santorum might have meant:

“[W]e’re now seeing *hostility toward*— maybe *demeaning of* is more appropriate, but let me use “hostility toward” — we’re now seeing *hostility toward and demaning of religious faith and belief* we’ve never seen before.”

There is some truth in this. Both the Catholic Church and evangelical Christians have become punching bags for many comedians, TV shows, and political commentators and columnists. In other words, there are many ways in which we Christians, especially, can feel, heck, at times can see, a certain sense of hostility toward us and our faith in the general culture. Some of the sensing of hostility I believe comes from a misunderstanding of what is and is not Christian faith and practice, which is why I feel the so-called “religious freedom” laws

are mostly nonsense, but I think the statement that a good portion of the modern culture demeans and is hostile to Christians and to Christian belief, and religious belief in general, is beyond debate.

Hostility; our enemies are against and seem to overwhelm us; we are encountering a storm in the sea of some opinion and pseudo-intellectual leaders and professors. What can we do as we, to quote from "Hamlet," "suffer the slings and arrows," if not of "outrageous fortune," at least of cultural attitudes hostile to faith and to people of faith?

This brings me to that well known story of David and Goliath. Now, "I don't want to cause trouble, but," as one of my bosses, Laura Hoffman, likes to say, but what is the point of, what *is* the nature of, this story? It is a story of the people of God, as the Israelites saw themselves, a story of the people of God facing an hostile enemy so frightening and powerful that it could be characterized by a man whose size has not been found, ever, among human remains, Goliath. I am not asking you *not* to believe that David and Goliath is actual history, but I suspect that it is not, that David and Goliath is a *legend*, or at least a substantial exaggeration of an event, that was told to the people of Israel and later of Judah, the people of faith, as a sort of pep-talk, a *theological pep-talk*, that no matter how hostile those

“slings and arrows” arraigned against them might be, with God on their side, overcoming those “slings and arrows” was always possible. It was not David’s own “sling” that defeated Goliath and the Philistines, it was God’s sling! God is always with the people of God.

And this is very much the way I see our Gospel reading. Whether or not Jesus once stilled waters of the Sea of Galilee means little to me, but that *Jesus can still our troubled waters today*, ah, that is really good news to me. That, to mix metaphors, or at least to change them, whatever we face, “slings and arrows” or “troubled waters,” we do not face them alone! What I am suggesting is that the message the story of David and Goliath provided to the people of Israel almost 3000 years ago is the same as the message the Gospel writer has provided to us: God is with us, *at least when we are followers of Jesus*, and not just when things are nice and easy and going well, but when we are facing, well, facing hostile forces, including hostility toward and demeaning of our faith.

*. . . when we are facing hostility toward and demeaning of our faith*, when the Church itself is bouncing on stormy seas, as followers of Jesus, we need to know that God is with us!

But sadly, the stormy seas or troubled waters or slings and arrows we face are in no small measure not because Jesus has failed to help us, but because we the Church have failed to follow Jesus. Failed, the Church has failed. Failed not because our numbers are falling, but rather that our numbers' falling is strong evidence of our, of the Church's, failing. And I believe the Church has failed because it has not been doing a good job of taking *the real* Jesus Christ into a world that needs Him so much . . . and the world does indeed need what Jesus provides. Failed to do a good job of taking *the real* Jesus Christ into the world, because we have not done as he did or would want us to do, whether in how we speak of him or in how we act to those who do not know him or in how we act to those who do want to follow him but, my oh my, who simply are not as pious as we, or dare to hold somewhat different ecclesiological or theological understandings than do we.

And in our failures, we generate some of the culture's rejection not only of the faith we should proclaim, but of the one whom we proclaim. Real hostility toward another human being cannot exist when Jesus is within a person; *hostility*, any hostility except hostility against evil, cannot exist other than for a few passing moments within the soul of anyone who knows Jesus Christ, cannot exist within the person who has been *transformed* by Jesus Christ.

Want proof? Think of the words of forgiveness of members of Emanuel AME Church to the arrested probable murderer.

And we — members of Christ's Church — demean our faith through arguments among ourselves that deal with matters not worth the conflict. This is a lack of faith! For those of our congregations following the Revised Common Lectionary — and Presbyterians and Episcopalians follow the same Lectionary, — two weeks ago we read Jesus' words, "if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand." And a Church divided simply is not the Church that Jesus wants; of that I am sure.

And so we Christians come together, we do not need to wring our hands and tear our garments because the culture seems like a Goliath aligned against us; we do not need to wring our hands and tear our garments because, if we follow Jesus, if we really do want to follow Jesus, we can change the culture.

It is fitting that on this first Sunday worshipping together that we do gather, at least figuratively, gather as one family — one Church — around a table, no, not *a* table, *the Lord's Table*. And again, it is possible to mix one's metaphors. Certainly when we come here

we can be comforted from the slings and arrows or troubled waters in our personal lives, and in that sense, The Lord's Table *is* a wharf when waters are troubled. It is a safe harbor. But just as a boat is no good if it spends all its time tied to a wharf, the Lord's Table is not just a place to enjoy peace, for us it is also a place of preparation for going back out into the choppy waters, back to face the slings and arrows, but going out, going away from the table differently from how we came to the Table as we go to proclaim our Lord in that hostile culture. For to use a term that I borrowed from a strange source, an opera by a self-avowed atheist, Richard Wagner, whose comprehension of faith seems to me to have shown through, we leave having taken of the meal that provided the energy for Jesus to go forth to do his task, and so, not only may this Table provide safe harbor for us, but may the meal we take here provide the spiritual energy for us to go forward in the face of our individual and collective task of taking Jesus into the world, facing the hostility we perceive to be there, just as in the story, David faced Goliath, not alone, but knowing that God is with us.

For as a psalmist wrote:

**The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. <sup>10</sup> And those who know**

**your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.**