



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“My Blindness”

Scripture – Leviticus 19:1-4 and 9-14

Sermon preached by Rabbi Douglas E. Krantz

Sunday, April 8, 2018

I am honored to be standing in the pulpit of the Westminster Presbyterian Church here in Wilmington. I wish I could say I am honored to stand shoulder to shoulder with my colleague The Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones. However, the truth is that at best, on a good day, I stand only with my head barely to his shoulder. And I mean that literally and figuratively. My colleague honors me because he is such a significant voice here in Delaware and a significant voice for our time here in the United States. My wife Joan and I are deeply touched by our friendship with both of the Joneses.

So, now, a Sunday morning arrives amid turmoil and tumult in the world around us. Social norms are being upended. Sacred democratic institutions are under assault. We are in the midst of a concerted, coordinated and cynical attack on civility. At the same time the delicate fabric of truth has been sullied by an unfit leader. These assaults are a challenge to a healthy religious perspective. Yet, no matter how challenged we may be, these are the significant times during which you and I have been fated to live and to struggle for social justice. So, for men and women of conscience and religious sensibility, these are moments of opportunity. More than that, many here in our sanctuary are among the privileged. Not just privileged, but White Privileged. During the season when we Jews are keenly aware of the plagues that hardened Pharaoh’s heart, I fret that privilege has hardened my heart because our religious responsibility begins with those who are not privileged. We who are privileged possess more opportunities, more choices, more freedom both economically and politically than has been true in any other time or place. That is not true for most of God’s good children here in the United States and around the world. Many are left behind, especially those of color. Yet, we must find our way on a path strewn with land mines of contradictions and moral ambiguity. Our religious responsibility rests on all of our shoulders because our neighbors live on the edge of economic disaster.

So, as I prepared to meet you, I turned to a favorite passage of mine from the book of Leviticus chapter 19: In Hebrew: *kaj n i r r tk rug hb pku ar j kke r tk*. In English: “Do not curse the deaf and before the blind do not set a stumbling block.” These words teach us that our religious enterprise focuses our attention to God’s good children who need a helping hand. Our religious hearts make us responsible for those who struggle to find their way on paths strewn with landmines of social injustice. “Do not curse the deaf and do not put a stumbling block before the blind” summons us to do more than just accept our broken hearts. The destination of our religious journey is a road toward finding a common decency for all of God’s children. Be careful about what you say. Be extra careful of another person when they are unable to hear your voice. Watch out to help those who can’t hear and those who can’t see, both physically and metaphorically. So that is the significant challenge for our being here together today at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

kaj n i, tk rug hbpku arj kke, tk: Do not curse the deaf and before the blind do not set a stumbling block.” When I studied traditional commentary of Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, the 10th Century commentator on rabbinic texts he sums up our traditional view of what these words mean. Rashi writes: “I am not other than deaf.” But, we know of course that Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak was neither deaf nor blind. He was a brilliant student of rabbinic thinking during the time of the Crusades. The rabbi teaches us that we human beings are all deaf and blind. What I think Rashi teaches us is to focus our sight on others. We don't hear ourselves as others hear us. We cannot see ourselves as others see us. We are each of us deaf to our own words and blind to how we are perceived by others, even those who love us most profoundly. So, do not curse the deaf and do not set a stumbling block before the blind, is not so simple. There is an old Jewish saying about us as a people: “It is not easy to be Jewish.” Well, it's not easy to be a religious person.

If I have learned anything in these soon to be seventy years of my life, the truth is that seeing failing and disability in others is far too easy for sentient human beings. Medieval commentator Rashi is correct. Blindness and deafness assault our otherwise healthy character. I'm diminished by my own blind and deaf indifference. Near where my wife Joan and I live, below the canal, on the Odessa National Golf Course, we regularly see homes that are painfully small, so profoundly in need of major repairs that they must be unimaginably drafty during the bone-chilling cold of winter and unimaginably stifling in the torrid humid heat of summer. Close by where we live, I drive by just such painful human dwellings on my way to Walgreens or to Planned Parenthood in Dover. I regularly see frail structures masquerading as homes. And I see those dwelling places knowing for sure there is hunger and suffering nearby. And what do I do? I keep driving. I do nothing. I am willfully deaf and blind because I have too much to do, too many privileges to enjoy: including speaking here today. Privileged living creates its own deafness and blindness.

My pain took me back some years to the words of professor Thomas Nagel of New York University, who was a part of the American studies program when I did some graduate work there in that field of study the year I met my wife Joan. Professor Nagel wrote [in 1979 in *The London Times Literary Supplement*] these words: “Each of our inner lives is such a jungle of thoughts, feelings, fantasies and impulses that civilization would be impossible if we expressed them all, or if we could all read each other's minds . . . just as social life would be impossible if we expressed all of our lustful, aggressive, greedy, anxious, or self-obsessed feelings in ordinary public encounters. So, would inner life be impossible if we tried to become holy persons whose thoughts, feelings, and private behavior could be safely exposed to public view.” We are complex. Overcoming blindness and deafness to the suffering that is nearby is not easily accomplished.

Today, especially, we can blindly and deafly feel virtuous, if we focus on one vain pathetic prevaricating person who happens to live in our White House, you know, the one that was built by black slaves. That's not good enough for our religious sensibilities. We are religiously obligated to take care of more than our own house. We have lost our way if we are only looking at the worst among us as opposed to the best. We are deaf to the damage we are doing to ourselves and to the moral character of our society when we fail to stop and extend a helping hand. We are blind to the dangerous path we choose if we fail to examine our own role in the perpetuation of a suffering and economically desperate, educationally deprived underclass living in our midst.

Every time I drive by those places of deep poverty, I engage in an act of willful, self-important privileged blindness. Michael Harrington wrote in 1962 about how we drive around pockets of poverty, or on a freeway above those who suffer below. Harrington explained: “Poverty should be defined in terms of those who are denied the minimal levels of health, housing, food, and education that our present stage of scientific knowledge specifies as necessary for life as it is now lived in the United States. Poverty should be defined psychologically in terms of those whose place in the society is such that they are internal exiles who, almost inevitably, develop attitudes of defeat and pessimism and who are therefore excluded from taking advantage of new opportunities. Poverty should be defined absolutely, in terms of what man, [woman,] and society could be. As long as America is less than its potential, the nation as a whole is impoverished by that fact. As long as there is the other America, we are, all of

us, poorer because of it.” [From: The Other America by Michael Harrington, page 175] Poverty is the responsibility of the privileged. Poverty is our responsibility.

Yet, I keep driving. We have become a nation of what the great Jewish sage of the 12th century, the greatest of our teachers since Moses, Moses Maimonides, called scandal mongers. We traffic in insinuations and sow suspicion comfortably. We cast about what Maimonides called "that dust of the evil tongue" that once released is impossible to retrieve. My understanding of religion is that we, you and I, are responsible.

We deceive ourselves. Here I borrow from the noted Harvard sociologist Sessile Bok who specializes in the subject of lying. Bok delivered a keynote address to the American newspaper editors on April 1, 1998. I quoted her 20 years ago in reference to a president of the United States who was prevaricating in public. She said: “We criticize the media but consume their products. We are too quick to blame ‘the media’ for excesses we perceive in what we nevertheless continue to read or view. In answering polls, we do not reveal this conflict. We tend to portray ourselves as the people we would like to be, rather than as our everyday confused selves.” That is to say, we are deaf to the meaning of our own words and blind to our own actions and their consequences.

So, these are challenging days for us all. We are summoned today by the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The suffragette Marjory Stoneman Douglas taught us: “...be depressed, discouraged and disappointed at failure and the disheartening effects of ignorance, greed, competition and bad politics — but never give up.” We shall not give up.

So, what might they say about the Rabbi stood in the pulpit of Westminster Presbyterian Church? I hope that they will say that the Rabbi spoke about his own deafness to the words of Judaism and his blindness to the path of a wholesome decent life. I hope they will say that, however effectively or ineffectively the Rabbi thought to remind himself, above all else that we are privileged, but, fail to wear the garments of our privilege responsibly. The rabbi sought to remind himself that we have work to do. I hope they will say that the rabbi reminded himself that he is subject to failure, flawed too often willing to walk or drive by the hand outstretched in need of help. We struggle amid the minefields of moral ambiguity trying to live more wholesomely, more decently, more forgivingly of ourselves and others in spite of all the self-imposed deafness and blindness. Then, perhaps we will be able to say these words that I love so much, words from E.E. Cummings: “now the ears of my ears are opened. now the eyes of my eyes are opened.” So, on this glorious Sabbath may the ears of our ears be open to the muffled sounds of God’s good children, and the eyes of our eyes be lifted to the bright landscape that is filled with hopeful opportunities to fulfill the promise of social justice for all of God's children that comes with the sunrise each and every day. Amen.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Composer of creation and spinner of the stars, we give thanks for your good earth and for the numerous blessings of our lives. Generous God, we continue to believe that spring is just around the corner, but this year we have encountered an extensive corner that is painfully slow to circumnavigate! The earth teases us with signs of new growth, but the thermometer has stubbornly refused to acknowledge we are overdue for a change of seasons. We pray that we will not deplete our patience as we dream of warm, sunny days that surely cannot be too far off.

Loving God, you are the One from whom all blessings flow, and for many of us the blessings are rich and plentiful – loving parents who provided a safe and caring home in which to grow, good schools with adequate resources to increase our knowledge and develop our talents, a country established on the principles of liberty and justice for all, a supportive religious community where we glean wisdom that has endured the test of time, values that develop a strong character, the revelation of a distinct path that leads to a meaningful life, and an unflagging hope that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. For these and the many blessings of our lives we are profoundly grateful.

Yet, we pause this day to become aware of the ways that our blessings also can create blind spots. We can easily assume that others enjoy equal opportunities and fail to recognize the immense barriers many face. We can set our sights on those who appear to have more than we do and feel envy, rather than allowing ourselves to see the multitudes who have less and feel compassion.

We can be blind to the advantage of loving parents and fail to perceive the lasting scars of neglect and abuse. We can be blind to the benefit of attending decent schools, and not recognize the crippling effects of a weak education. We can be blind to the privilege of race and unable to comprehend the obstacles created by prejudice and suspicion. We can be blind to the good fortune of living in a democracy and unable to comprehend the desperate actions of those being suffocated by oppressive governments.

Patient God, each of us possesses some degree of nearsightedness. It is surely part of the human condition. Yet, we pray that we not add to our restricted vision by stubbornly refusing to question our field of sight or insisting that the poor brought it on themselves. Ignorance is not bliss. Ignorance leads to indifference and neglect, and tempers the abundance of our own lives.

Eternal God, supply us with the courage to hear your whispers deep in our soul urging us to remove any impediment that hinders our vision and prevents us from seeing what you yearn for us to discover. Now hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, "Our Father..."