

*Denying False Choices\**

September 29, 2024

St. James, Dexter

Mark 9:38-50

The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry

May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good Morning!

Are you happy with the way the world is?

How does this world need to be changed?

How in God's name are we going to be that change in this our world?

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your foot causes you to stumble cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble pluck it out...it is better to enter life maimed, with one eye, or one foot, or one hand, than to have two and be thrown into hell where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched."

Ahhhhh—Let me assure you that 21<sup>st</sup> Century, main-line Protestant preachers-----*well---* *we just live for passages like this*. Nothing says 'let's connect with the people and make scripture appealing to them' like a good old-fashioned chunk of the Bible admonishing people to cut off offending body parts, lest they risk eternal damnation, hellfire and worms. Particularly the worms.

Where the hell is Cotton Mather when you need him?

Here's my take on this piece of scripture: it's metaphor. Jesus was clear and Jesus was serious, there are things, parts of our lives, activities, actions, privileges, ways of being in the world that some of us take for granted that are not bringing us closer to God. They are, in fact, stumbling blocks for us and in some cases for other people. Faithful people, faithful, discerning people are called to excise these ways of being from our lives.

We need to relinquish those aspects of our lives, lest they separate us and others from our best selves and from the Love of God.

Last week I received an invitation from the President of the United States, to attend an event on Gun Violence Prevention at the White House. Whoa—really. So being the trusting person that I am, as my colleague Mark Miliotto always says, "Trust but verify." I sent the invitation to a former parishioner who used worked for the white house. I said, to her,

“Hey Tina, is this legit?” She quickly replied, “Oh yes! That’s exactly how those invitations are sent out. You should go.”

With that information I began rearranging my schedule and figured out that I could do my evening visit in Lansing the night before, drive home. Get up early and catch a 7:15 plane to Washington National airport. And because I had events I could not move for Friday, I could take an 8:15 evening plane back the same day. It would be intense, but at least I wouldn’t have to pack!

I arrive in Washington and spent the day taking zoom calls and doing work at St. John’s Lafayette, which is right across the park from the White House. When it came time, I straightened out my suit, fluffed my hair, and went over to stand in line to go through security.

There were about 200 of us in line. People from around the country. Ones who had lost their most favorite people in the world to guns. Moms like Pamela Bosely, who I knew from Chicago, whose son Terrell was killed coming out of church on April 4, 2006. She was two behind me in line. We hugged. I told her that the anniversary of Terrel’s death is in my phone and every year I say prayers for her and for him.

The folks in front of me were from Seattle, the ones directly behind, from Philadelphia. One woman worked for a foundation that directs funds to groups doing violence interruption. Another group had pins that said, “We stand with Parkland.” Parents of the children who were massacred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

I ran into the treasurer of Oakland County, Robert Wittenberg. He was on the very first zoom call we had as we began the work of putting together End Gun Violence Michigan.

Strangers and friends, gathered in a line outside the White House. The WHITE HOUSE! Let me just say something about being at there, it is amazing! I am the daughter of marine Lt. Col. I proudly stand for the Marine Corps Anthem and know all of the words. I adore our country. I do not believe we are perfect, but I am loyal to this land, and I could not help but cry as I walked through those doors. Officers from our armed forces, in their dress uniforms greeted each of us warmly, smiling and saying, “Welcome to the White House, thank you so much for coming.”

The Marine Band played. Reminding me of the soundtrack of my childhood. I shook hands with a Major in the Marine Corps, lamented that they have changed the dress blue uniform, swamping out the iconic blue trousers with the red stripe for plain white pants, and then I asked for selfie that I could send to my dad.

I wasn’t alone in my awe. Every person there had that look on their face. As we examined portraits and posed for photos in front of the presidential seal.

I made my way to my seat, sitting behind a sheriff from Charleston, SC and sitting next to a Sheriff from North Carolina, on the other side was a violence interrupter from Chicago.

We all sat for a while, buzzing with excitement and then the band began to play, *Hail to the Chief*, and we all stood in respect for the office of the President of the United States. Phones came out, and I cried, again.

The program began with a young woman who survived the shooting in Parkland, Florida. She told of that day and made clear, from that day on her life's work is to ensure that other students and families, do not have endure such unthinkable pain.

We were at the White House, 200 of us invited to watch President Biden and Vice President Harris sign new executive orders, putting more money into mental health counselling for high schools, cracking down of the creating of untraceable guns on 3D printers and machine gun conversion devices, and initiating ways to change "Active Shooter Drills" for our students so that they are more effective and far less traumatic.

What I saw in that room was the sadness of grief, the despair of loss, the presence of an abiding pain, turned into a purpose, promise and hope. I saw individuals who have said "No, to a false choice of having to choose between the second amendment and the safety of our siblings in this country."

We were challenged by the the Mayor of Birmingham, a survivor from Parkland, the Vice President, and the President to excise the belief, that in order to uphold the second amendment we must passively accept the random loss of people's lives in our country.

This all or nothing thinking, that in order to have gun rights we must accept having random, dead and wounded people is fatalistic, pessimistic and disregards God's call for us to act and to care.

Instead, I heard a call for us to relinquish our passivity, to let go of our nihilistic acceptance of avoidable deaths, and instead, strike those offending perceptions from our way of being, "Cut them off."

And I heard a recognition of the very many people in the room, who have spent much of their life's energy into cutting off those beliefs, and replacing them with the hard work of forging a more perfect way forward.

A way that honors every person's right to live in safety and be free from harm.

It was a Holy moment, in a secular space, in a place of world power, where in the midst of a fraught and perilous world I experienced a sense of hope, and a vision of what working for pragmatic change, bit by bit, can achieve.

Failing to take action, accepting our world as it is, means we run the risk of being stumbling blocks, for the little ones. A fate, that not one of us wants to bear.

May God continue to be with us in this work.

Amen.