

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church
13 August 2017
Pentecost X, Proper 14A (Matthew 14:22-33)

Prayers for Our Nation, Prayers for Strength:

Just and merciful God, we pray for our nation as we grieve the hatred in our midst. We give you thanks for the witnesses to your justice and mercy who, this Saturday, walked in faithfulness in Charlottesville, Virginia. We pray for the one whose life was lost in an egregious act of violence, and for the officers who died in the helicopter crash. We pray for those who mourn their deaths and for all who were injured. We pray for all victims of racist violence, for their families, and for those living in fear. We give thanks for courageous and faithful witnesses across time and space who have stood against bigotry, hatred and violence; and we pray for the strength to stand, wherever we are, for your justice and mercy for the sake of peace, equality and the well-being of all your people.

Strengthen us, we pray, to be your faithful witnesses. Empower us to follow your ways in all that we say and do, that we may serve you with the love of Christ not only on our lips, but reflected in our lives. We pray this in the name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

(The Rev. Dianne Andrews, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA)

Grant, O god, that your holy and life-giving spirit may so move every human heart, and the hearts of all the people of this land, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen

(The Book of Common Prayer)

What are you afraid of?

What are you afraid of?!?

OK, I'll tell you what I'm afraid of.

Snakes. Any kind. I don't know enough about reptiles to identify dangerous snakes from harmless slithery ones, so I just assume they a) Can climb trees and jump down on you; b) Will approach you from behind to bite you, and c) They're all poisonous. *We hates them! Nasty, slimy, slithery, bitey things!*

At my first Feast of St. Francis at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine my friend Gretchen and I were added to the clergy blessing thousands of pets in the garden. Mostly dogs and cats, and I blessed a bird, and a pair of hermit crabs (the boy owner told me they were sleeping) and, of course, one tyke brought forward a terrarium with... a snake.

Well, I couldn't very well turn him away, and Gretchen was too far from me to offer any help (and I'm sure she would have – that's why she's a bishop and I'm not), so I took a deep breath, reached down into the terrarium, touched the creature on the forehead and said, "O, snake, I don't know why God made you but there must be a reason. May you be blessed."

And, of course, I quickly removed my hand before the quiet serpent could wake up.

I mean, really... God must have had something in mind but it's beyond me... and so I can only assume that like all creation, snakes have some amount of goodness.

But that doesn't mean I have to like them.

What else am I afraid of?

Well, first, I'm not afraid of bats anymore. Well, I wouldn't want one landing on me, but over the summers we've had so many bats in our house that now I just sort of say, "OK, Mister Bat, time for you to go outdoors and eat a bunch of mosquitoes." Then I close each room door as the critter flies out, open the front door, and go about my business for ten or twenty minutes, and the bat is gone. They're really quite extraordinary creatures, but I don't want them flying around the house.

I don't care for spiders. I've made them sort of generic like snakes. All spiders are out to bite me and they're poisonous.

I'm not afraid of death. I'm somewhat concerned about the dying process – I don't want to linger – but many of you know our friend Jo Redman's comment: "I'm not afraid of death – I'm *curious!*" What a blessing those words have been. I trust that death itself is a transition into something more impossible than life, something glorious, and that maybe I'll finally understand all this life business.

I *am* afraid of crazy world leaders. Oh, I'm not afraid of the leaders themselves, but I am fearful of the consequences of their rhetoric, the bellicose words used in verbal confrontations, and how one man's last word (and, of course, this is *men* speaking) may be just enough to drive the other one over the edge, and the consequences would be devastating.

I *am* afraid of the alt-right. Just yesterday we saw hundreds of white nationalists confront police and other security personnel in Charlottesville and at the University of Virginia. It is *disgusting* that these men (and, let's face it, they were overwhelmingly men) feel empowered by the administration to flaunt their so-called righteous cause, to hurl epithets at Jews and people of color, to wave their flag and to proclaim that they will "take back our country." Take it back to what? Segregation? Jim Crow? Slavery?

What are *they* afraid of?

Here's what I think: They're afraid that they're losing power.

Thank you, good citizens who recognize power for what it is – a means of oppression and a way to maintain institutional racism.

Thank you, good people who understand privilege and work hard to confront it.

Thank you, men and women of good grace who celebrate diversity and refuse to live in fear.

Thank you, thank you.

To those who would celebrate white nationalism, white supremacy, I say, "Your time is over. It is done. *We will not return to the glorious 1950s or any other 'good old days' when you could burn crosses, lynch, and keep people down with the heel of your boot.*"

Maybe – just maybe – they will come to see that the power they thought they had was ephemeral. That the power they thought they had was inhumane. That the power they thought they had was sin.

The disciples thought Jesus was a ghost and they were afraid. I'm not afraid of ghosts – I don't think they exist, and they're not slithery or crawly, but perhaps that's a more modern observation than Jesus' time. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," he said. And then Peter, wacky Peter, sort of put Jesus to the test: "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And so Jesus said, "Come." Then Peter realized the water was pretty choppy and his fear returned and he began to sink: "Save me, Jesus!" And Jesus did.

"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Jesus could be speaking to me.

When I express my fear of, say, snakes – or the alt-right – it is a sign that I am losing my trust in God and my trust in my brothers and sisters, and I must not do that.

I must refuse to live in fear and anxiety, because in my heart I know that I am loved, I am protected, and I know that if I live in fear, evil wins. The Psalms and our prayers often tell us to be vigilant – "Your enemy prowls around like a lion, seeking someone to devour". But being vigilant, being prudent, is not the same as living in fear, and it does not mean that my faith has faltered.

I have no doubt – *no doubt* – that the God who made me will protect me, no matter what the circumstances. Even if I am set upon by enemies or the forces of evil – and they are real – in some way God is with me. Always.

We must confront evil. We must remember that darkness will not, can not, overwhelm the light that is Christ. We must turn that light up so that it will prevail and the darkness of evil will be overwhelmed by compassion and mercy and justice and love.

Maybe then we'll all be walking on water toward Jesus.

Amen.