

This is a Fight; Let's Act Like It

Lake Street Church of Evanston

Rev. Michael Woolf

October 20, 2019

Everyone has had the sensation of putting in hours of work on something, a big project perhaps where multiple different parts needed to come together. My experience in academia is often that I put a ton of effort into writing a conference paper to present. I polish it up, I pay attention to the footnotes, I anticipate rebuttals of my points. At the time when it's come to present the paper I usually feel like I've done my best work and that it's a really important paper. It's good to go on the day of, but I've missed something, and maybe this is a uniquely millennial problem but I suspect it's not – I've failed to plan for how I'm going to print the thing. And of course, when you really need to print something, what's the thing that's most likely to happen. A printer jam. The ink is out, the toner is dry, your printer just won't print because it's decided that it hates you and it beeps angrily because it's a jerk. There was care and attention focused on all the right things, but if you can't print the paper, you can't give it at a conference. Or you end up reading it on your phone. Worse things have happened, but don't underestimate that you need to print the darn paper. It's not that the printer was more important than the footnotes, but it is true that in that moment, it's hard to feel like you should have focused on the printing more. Maybe you should have cooed softly at the printer a week before in order to coax it to be kinder to you.

In a similar way, people of faith have many issues that demand our attention. This week, in the news, we saw our current administration announce a raft of changes to SNAP benefits, which will kick about 1 million kids off free school lunches for instance. We saw that those who do remain qualified for free school lunch will be forced to reapply for it. Of course, if the American people were to weigh in on this, I think they would reject it out of hand. While they say it'll save 90 million dollars, let's not kid ourselves – cruelty to those experiencing poverty was the point of that change. It was needlessly cruel. People of faith should have something to say about who should bear the burden of our budgets. And we do. But that's just one example of the sorts of things that happen all the time it seems like now. It's like drinking from the fire hose. How do you set priorities in your fight against the powers and principalities that Paul mentions, these institutions of flesh and blood, when those powers have the strategy of distracting you by the sheer volume of cruelty and malfeasance?

Well, I have something to say about that. Inevitably, in order to have an impact, we have to focus our efforts from time to time. I'll of course be writing a public comment about the changes I talked about above and the need for moral leadership. We will of course be committed to proposals that remove cruelty and malice from our immigration system. We will continue to fight for folks to realize that this planet is the only one we have. But for

the last month we have talked about gun violence. We have spent time looking at figures and analyzing what can be done. We have had rich conversations about what moral leadership looks like. We have every Sunday updated our gun violence commemoration in the front of the church.

But like our Sutra says on this Sunday above the removal of distracting thoughts, we have to be dedicated to focusing on what we want to do. Because it's easy to get distracted, not by frivolous things but the vast, overwhelming sum of things that demand people of faith's outrage and leadership. And I heard from some people who say, how can we take down our display out front, and so I want to make a few announcements.

While I have spoken about gun violence from this pulpit explicitly for a few sermons, I don't think that's enough. I won't continue to preach about gun violence every week, but I think it's important for us to maintain our display through the end of 2019. Now, the weather may make that hard. Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. We will update the display after worship, and we will have a prayer service and commissioning when we take it down in the New Year. We will then mail those flags along with a letter to those legislators most able to bring about the real policy changes we need to make. We will apply as much pressure as this community can muster to call people to make decisions that reflect the values of compassion, justice, and care for the vulnerable. We will tell them that this community is motivated by the teachings of Jesus, the Buddha, great philosophers and moral teachers, and we will call on them to act.

We will also be having an opportunity for folks on November 10th after worship to make art together in a collaborative and community driven way to respond to gun violence. More on that will be available soon. I will also be attempting to get together community leaders in Evanston to discuss what sort of innovative projects in a very local way we can pursue to be on the cutting edge of reducing gun violence here.

So all that's to say – this dedication from me, the staff here, and hopefully from yourselves is not going anywhere. They want you to be distracted, but we will be as plugged in as we can be. That doesn't mean that we spend all our time on the printer – other justice issues will continue to be discussed and pursued. However, from the meaning that I've seen made here, from the amount of all in I've seen, I don't think we're ready to move on just yet.

Because this is a fight. And we don't have all the answers, but we do have some ability to focus and make an impact – to practice real moral leadership. In a fight, you cannot become distracted. I learned that at 8 years old when I lost a fight badly. Maybe you've had a similar experience. We are here to stay, and we are here to win. But this is a fight. Let's act like it.