

MORE LIGHT
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and more light yet to break forth from His holy word. (Rev. John Robinson. Spoken to pilgrims before sailing on Mayflower from England to America in 1620.)

The Bible (“His holy word”) is the written foundation of our faith tradition. It has a privileged voice at the table. For some traditions such as evangelicalism it is the only voice that matters.

But for us Presbyterians, the Bible is not the only voice. We also have a book of confessions covering nearly 2000 years, from the 4th century Nicene Creed to the Brief Statement of Faith of 1983. They too have a voice at the table. For some traditions, Bible and creeds are the end of the conversation. But not for us.

We also believe in the Spirit, the living word of God that can shed more light on old understandings as we listen to each other in community, sharing personal experiences and scientific findings. And over time and over many generations, we have learned things that shattered our previous certainties. I’ll get to some historic examples but first the gospel lesson for today.

John 17:1-11

Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy One, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

One year ago in the middle of the night in a city not far from here, five policemen shot a man dead while he lay upon the sidewalk. He had been stopped and questioned for suspicious behavior.

He started arguing. Other police arrived.

The agitated man nicked an officer with a penknife. The troublemaker was tasered and knocked to the ground. He kept flailing about and thus was shot dead with 23 bullets.

Later it was learned the victim suffered from mental illness.

But in the heat of the night, police saw a “mad dog” and shot. It’s a natural reaction to a perceived mortal threat unless you’ve been trained to practice restraint—as most policemen are.

I, for one, marvel at the incredible restraint law enforcement officers exercise in ugly, vicious and often life-threatening situations. Their professional training shows more often than not. Several of our own church members are law enforcement officers and do their jobs well, professionally and with restraint.

But in far too many cases in our land, training is lacking or inadequate and restraint is missing. Some officers go rogue and ignore the law knowing that in

many places the powers that be will excuse them. That's why many states have citizen police review boards. West Virginia does not, or so I've been told.

This particular shooting incident came to the attention of Hoppy Kercheval, the voice of West Virginia conservatives (and son of our own Pat Kercheval!). Here's what he had to say in his newspaper column last month:

Police have an incredibly difficult job. They deal with the worst of the worst. Officers are trained to always be on alert because they don't know when an apparently routine situation can turn life-threatening.

But police are also taught to use restraint, to first try to defuse a situation rather than escalate.

In this case the grand jury decided not to bring criminal charges against the five police officers. But this case warrants a more thorough review, especially now that the public finally knows the autopsy results, 23 gunshot wounds, 12 in the back.

Citizens need to have confidence that their city police are there to, as their motto says, "serve, protect and respect."

This past Tuesday the attorney for that slain man's family met with the Shepherdstown Ministerial Association. He conveyed his great dismay at the killing of that virtually defenseless man, but even greater dismay at the silence of the faith community in the Eastern Panhandle. What would it take, he asked, to provoke rage over such an act?

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today. Jesus prayed: *May they be one as we are one.* There's more to that than can be said at one time, but we can say at least this much: *To be one with God as Jesus is one with God is to be in harmony with God's compassion for the abused and mistreated of all races, conditions and sexual orientations.* It is to be a channel of peace, love and hope.

Sometimes we need more light to see the truth in order to act with righteous anger and compassion. *May they be one as we are one. May they see the way and the truth that leads to life.*

But the truth is: we don't always see.

Sometimes we are willfully blind. Sometimes we are simply ignorant.

Sometimes we need more light to overcome the fear of "the other" that drives us to dismiss them as inferior, or treat them as "mad dogs." Many of us fear "the other" and the stranger. And if we are holding a gun in the heat of the night we too just might shoot to kill, or if we don't have a gun, vicious words will do.

Don't be so sure we're better than those five policemen. Don't be so sure.

When Christian pilgrims arrived in this country with Bibles in hand, they saw Native Americans as godless infidels deserving death. After all, God had given Europeans this promise land. Christians were the chosen people of God and pagan redskins were not. And so they were hunted and shot—a noble people left half dead and imprisoned.

And then something happened. Light dawned upon those self-righteous people and they change their view and ways. At least some did.

When Christian pilgrims arrived in this country with Bibles in hand, they enslaved Africans since the Bible said white skinned people were ordained by God to subject people of color. And so it was for 500 years.

And then something happened. Light dawned upon those self-righteous people and they change their views and their ways. At least some did.

When Christian pilgrims arrived in this country with Bibles in hand, men got to vote and women didn't. Women would be held down and kept in their place by men. The Bible said that's they way it should be and so it was.

And then something happened. Light dawned upon those self-righteous people and they change their views and their ways. At least some did.

When Christian pilgrims arrived in this country with Bibles in hand, heterosexuality was enshrined as divine and homosexuality as demonic. Homosexuals were denounced by the church, knocked to the ground, tasered and shot as threats to society and marriage.

And then something happened. Light dawned upon those self-righteous people and they change their views and their ways. At least some did.

Yes, we have much to regret and much to repent of. And still, we must be humble at all times. For how can we know we are not now as blind and wicked as our ancestors in this land? We truly must be humble and open to God's judgment upon are smugness and excuses while half the world goes hungry. What will our great grandchildren think of our apathy in the face of such inequality?!

It's true: People can be appalling and wicked. Sometimes it's tempting to destroy all the wicked and hateful people in the world and start all over rebuilding a good world with a few righteous people—like us.

But that's been tried.

In fact, that's the story we call Noah and the Flood. According to that story, God was so disgusted at the human race for their violence against each other, God decided to destroy the whole human race with yet more violence. But afterwards, according to that mythic and ironic folktale, God felt remorse and repented.

God realized violence is no way to redeem humanity. Another way must be found. So God put a rainbow in the heavens as a sign that someday we would find a way to be one, at peace, living in harmony with all.

One day we all will be gathered in as one. Shiites and Sunnis. Tutsis and Hutus. Palestinians and Israelis. Muslims and Jews. Catholics and Protestants. Men and women. Gays and straights. Rich and poor. Whites and blacks.

One day all will be one.

It's the Beloved's prayer.

Breathe it in.

And live it out today.