A Devotional on Racial Intolerance and Civil Unrest

The week of May 6, 1970 brought protestors of the Vietnam War (noted as Cambodia) and Kent State Massacre to the front of Kinsey Hall, originally a music hall and the president’s office, at Valparaiso University. The original protest was peaceful, bringing about students wishing for change in the country. But, a rouge group of students after the peaceful protests decided to make a statement and burn down Kinsey Hall, thus ruining years of musical work and campus history.

Below is a sermon from Norman Nagel, previously a dean of the Chapel of the Resurrection, given at Valparaiso University following the events of Kinsey Hall’s burning.

Fifty years later, may it serve as a reminder that the evil still exists, and as a devotional on defeating that evil.

Seventh Sunday of Easter

LUKE 24:44–49

Valparaiso University (1970, the year Kinsey Hall caught fire)

We came close to three events last week: Kinsey, Kent, and Cambodia. There is a legend that it was a toss-up whether Valparaiso University would be carried on by the Lutherans or the Klansmen. The Lutherans won out, and the Klansmen have since gone underground. But they are still there. By “there” we usually mean “in the town,” but there is a little klansman in the heart of each one of us. In the night he got control of someone’s heart. It happened on Ascension Day in the morning, while it was dark, on the green of Old Campus. It wasn’t a burning cross but a burning building.

One person is enough to do that. We each have a shuddering potential for evil. I speak of human hands starting the fire. This seems most likely, though one must allow the possibility of accident or spontaneous combustion, just as one must allow the possibility that Mr. Nixon might have made a wise decision. There are few things we can be quite certain about. It seemed to me
there were people burning too. Some of Albert Huegli [university president], his colleagues, and the musicians was being burned up. Let us not make a too facile decision between human and material things. If I snatch from you something that is precious to you and trample on it, I am trampling on you. A faculty wife stood guard over a rescued pile of papers. A piled of papers? Yes. Ten years of a man’s music work. Then a student’s thesis was announced not burned. The harpsichord was safe. The organs damaged but not ruined. Through the hideous smoke came bright bursts of thankfulness. No one, I think, looked on the fire and found it good. Yet if we had spotted the person who started the fire, the little klansman in the heart of each of us would have cried, “Lynch that person!”

When we are deeply stirred, we want to do something. It was good to get into a line and work together moving things out of the smoking building. The fraternity brother’s cup of coffee was like Jesus’ cup of cold water. We wanted to speak our revulsion at the insanity and wanted to save as much as we could for tomorrow. We wanted to say it in a way that matters, say it with action.

We do not begin to probe the fire, I feel, if we see it as intended to attack Albert Huegli or this university. It may have been a brainwashed anarchist or, perhaps, someone driven mad by the appalling follies inflicted by people captive to an often inhuman system, someone who felt that something must be done. The bitter turmoil of our frustration burst out there in blind destructive folly. One folly does not overcome another. By such a folly we are taken over by folly. Even worse than being unable to do anything is to do something stupid and destructive. That puts us on the side of what we oppose. It was a paralyzing eruption of irrational destruction. What can we say?

There are times when any of our own words are too cheap. Then it is good to say together words that we have from Christ. We needed to get our bearings, and it was Ascension Day. There was hold, resource, and direction. In the Chapel of the Resurrection there was a man screaming, crazed by acid. He came, finally, to kneel at the high alter, moaning out his mangled heart to Christ. Then he went away, not to come back to us. He may have written himself off, but Christ has not nor may we. There are worse fires than those that burn out buildings. Fires burning out people are burning among us every day. The Ascension Day sermon said the things that are said on Ascension Day, but they were said for us this Ascension Day. Then the choir rang out Et Resurrexit. That really connected. We prayed. We were blessed. In the evening the cry was hear, “Not Kinsey, but Kent and Cambodia. Do not ask us to stop. We have our holy cause and must press on,” which at that stage sounded rather like the priest and the Levite.
Remember the words of our Ascension Day Lord: “Ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). If we forget that, we may find ourselves making outraged holy statements about apartheid in South Africa while doing nothing about how a black man may be treated in Valparaiso. Or we may be so fired-up righteous in the Cambodian cause that we break off communication with a roommate. We may not stay in Jerusalem and make that the limit of our care. Our Lord points on to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth, but we may not go on to them shirking and bypassing what our care is here.

Our Lord bids His disciples to stay awhile in Jerusalem so they may be equipped to go into all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The enabling equipment is in Christ’s promise in the Gospel for this Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus says some hard lines: being cut off, killed. “You have to be ready to face it as My disciples, and you won’t be seeing Me around much longer.” He was crucified, dead, and buried. The third day He rose again and ascended. Then the Counselor would come. He would not come before that. His work is to convey what Christ achieved, so Christ must achieve that first. Then the kerygma or, more fully, the Gospel, the liberating Good News. It is that that the Counselor would bring us to fasten on, on Christ. We frustrate His work if we pay too much attention to Him. Whether we call Him Comforter, Counselor, Paraclete, Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost does not matter to Him so much as that we have hold of Christ. He is God at work through the lowly means of words, water, wine, and bread to bring home to us Christ and His gifts and set them aflame in our lives. Holy fire. But that is next Sunday’s lesson.

In today’s Gospel we have the promise for the days when we no longer see Jesus. There is a personal organic wholeness to what Jesus ties together. The Spirit comes from the Father and from Jesus and bears witness of Him, and we are drawn into that witnessing as we receive Christ and are with Him. If we are with Jesus, then we have conflict with all that is antichrist, and the supreme antichrist is the one who operates in the name of God. It is in the church that we have the opportunity to be the supreme antichrist. This we do when we displace Christ with our own notions; when we say, “Thus says the lord,” when the Lord has not spoken; when we put God’s name on our own wishes, plans, and programs, then unchurch those who disagree with us. “What sort of a Christian are you if you burn your draft card?” “What sort of a Christian are you if you are willing to fight in Cambodia?”
Jesus does not promise that the Spirit will give us little messages to settle our questions. We are not slaves but children, and we grow in stature as we wrestle our way through. The Spirit brings Christ alive in us and brings us resources to live out His forgiveness and His love. Christ’s forgiveness and love take a different and unique shape in each person. There are some cantankerous, dim-witted, too clever by half, ostentatious, fanatic, complacent people. I can tell you what is wrong, what each needs to do, what is the score. When I do that, I am making a mocking imitation of God. God, in Christ, does not deal with us on the basis of our score. He loves the whole mangy lot of us, and we are stuck with the whole mangy lot when we are with Christ.

Again this morning Christ’s forgiveness wipes us clean and we go to live out that forgiveness with one another. We shall not then be able to write someone off as a lost cause. If we think others are misguided or evading their responsibility, we will tell them so, debate, and seek to persuade back and forth, but as they are Christ’s child and I am Christ’s child, I cannot cast others aside without at the same time denying Christ. We may each live out our loyalty to Christ in a different way, embrace one another as brothers and sisters for Christ’s sake. There are not the resources for that in me, or in others, but only in Christ, the Brother of us all. Christ’s body and blood go into you and into me. Thus we are bound together. With such resources we live together. No other fact is larger than that.

First in Jerusalem, then also in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Kinsey, Kent, Cambodia. At whatever point we see our task for living out our loyalty to Christ—in conflict with evil, sharing suffering, healing bodies and lives—we are His witnesses. With Him and unafraid, we are bold to act, bold to prepare to act, even when things may look as if they are crashing down on us. Without panic we may even go into God’s world that we have marred and cheerfully plant an apple tree.

Amen.