

My Vow

June 17, 2020

Dear Hanover Saints,

Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time in his life to publicly, prophetically, and purposefully condemn the unjust systems, structures, and leaders that were causing death. We call it Palm Sunday. While processing into the city, the Pharisees ordered Jesus to make his disciples stop crying out. Jesus said: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Imagine a leader who has tremendous power, and few, if any, people willing to challenge him. Imagine a leader with little regard for what is factually correct, who has used multiple media outlets to create fear and spread anger. Then, imagine that leader is indifferent to the potential death of others.

The stones are crying out. The time for silence is past.

This Saturday there is going to be a political rally in a city that in the last week has experienced a 182% increase in COVID cases, and the number of hospitalizations has doubled. The rally is scheduled to be held in an indoor arena that seats 20,000 people. Medical professionals in the city are virtually begging for the event to be canceled. Everything about the gathering violates the recommendations of the same task force the leader appointed to guide the people through a pandemic. The report from the task force has not only disappeared, it is mocked as the leader and his followers appear every day without masks.

To enter the arena, one must sign a waiver acknowledging the risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus, vowing not to hold the campaign, city, or arena legally responsible. To require a waiver is to openly acknowledge danger and risk, and in the face of that risk, it seeks to protect the one(s) holding the event from being held responsible. True regard for the risk – and for the people – would lead most to not create the risk in the first place. For this leader, protecting personal, financial, and political power is more important than protecting the lives of Americans.

Not surprising from a leader who would think out loud in front of the world about whether ingesting Lysol or bleach would be effective in fighting the virus, and then hide behind the shield of sarcasm. In New York city in the following week the number of emergency phone calls to the poison hotline related to ingesting these agents doubled. Praise God there were no reported deaths.

In 1925 and again in 1992 the United Nations declared that the use of chemicals in warfare is a crime against humanity, including the chemicals in what is known as "tear gas." In order to pass this measure, a compromise was created that exempted domestic law enforcement from the ban. What is illegal and defined as a potentially lethal weapon throughout the world continues to be used by law enforcement officials in America on its own citizens. This chemical was used against peaceful protestors in front of the White House - and the world - to clear the way so that a leader could stand in front of a church, Bible in hand, for a photograph. And this immediately following a press conference in which the leader threatened to deploy the military against its own people.

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For those who are distraught or disappointed thinking these are political words, I have three responses.

First, I could take the legalistic way out and say that nowhere have I suggested what anyone should do on November 3; that being political is advocating for one person over another. That's too easy.

Second, and more profoundly, although these words may have political implications, they are about life and death. These words speak to the danger and risk – even of death – produced by this leader.

Thirdly, as a pastor I am offering a response to actual events through the lens of the life and teaching of Jesus in the effort to keep Christ at the center of our decisions, our words, and our actions; ironically, I am writing to encourage us *not* to be political in our pursuit of justice and peace.

Finally, if you are not able to accept this crucial distinction, then I would ask for your grace and understanding, and, if you think I need it, your forgiveness.

On November 6, 1994 I was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA). As a part of the service I was asked nine questions; the response to each is called a vow. On that day I was asked: “Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?”

I said: “I will.”