

Good morning, St. James.

It is a pleasure for me to be here with you today to be worshiping with you and to be confirming and receiving and reaffirming a number of people in the faith and in the Episcopal church. It is good to share this day with you. Just as a side note, normally when the bishop comes, she is the one who celebrates the Eucharist. I'm getting over a cold, so I've asked Father Mark to celebrate the Eucharist today. And I will greet you outside, but I won't shake your hand, not because I'm being unfriendly, but because I don't want to share my cold with you. But I'm very glad to be here.

In 1989, two theologians named Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon wrote a hugely influential book called *Resident Aliens*. Now, it is not about the immigration debate, nor is it about creatures from outer space. Instead, it is about the place of the church in the modern world. "A world," they said, "which came into being as a fresh new world sometime between 1960 and 1980." They date the change that brought an old world to an end and a new world into being to a Sunday evening in summer 1963 in Greenville, South Carolina. On that night in defiance of the state's blue laws, the Fox Theater opened on a Sunday, and seven regular attenders of the Methodist Youth Fellowship entered the church in order to be seen and then quietly sneaked out the back door to join John Wayne at the movies.

That evening, they say, was a watershed for Greenville, South Carolina, the date when society served notice that it would no longer be a support for the church. And that night, in the first skirmish of an open battle between faith and the world of entertainment to provide the worldview of the young, the movies won. Hauerwas and Willimon were born in a world where their parents knew that everyone in town was Christian and would grow up to be a Christian and would at least be able to identify the church they belonged to even if they never went there.

On that night in 1963, as teenagers, they entered a new world of many choices. Nearly 40 years after that book came out, this is not news to us. The world has changed. Christianity is not the only option in our society. The options include not just other religions, but the increasingly powerful choice of no religion at all. And the options also include something that Hauerwas and Willimon didn't foresee. The public proclamation of a form of Christian faith that is hard to square with the Jesus who proclaims love, who we read about in the scriptures.

Over the same period of time, since 1989, the Episcopal Church's membership, like that of most other mainline Protestant denominations, has declined substantially, partly due to various conflicts, but in large part

attributable to the general decline in expectations in our society that everyone should have a church. And while we might mourn the loss of the Episcopal Church's once greater numerical power, Hauerwas and Willimon argue as many others have, that there are ways in which true Christian witness can actually be stronger in this new world. A church that everyone is expected to be a part of doesn't have to work very hard to reach people or to proclaim the good news of hope that Jesus offers. And that's a church that can lose sight of its mission and grow complacent. And in times of division and controversy like our present time, a complacent church can become irrelevant, "non-essential," in the words of Hauerwas and Willimon.

A church that is on the edge of society, on the other hand, has to know who God is and what God has done for us in Jesus, and has to be ready to proclaim that truth in creative, courageous, faithful ways to people in the community who can't be assumed to ever having heard it before, people who might view Christianity negatively because of what they read about Christians saying on the news, people who haven't heard that God is love. Being a faithful church in today's world means being what Hauerwas and Willimon call a beachhead of heaven, an outpost, an island of one culture in the midst of another, a place where the distinctive language and lifestyle of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced. "In Jesus," they say, "God has established a beachhead in our world." They write, "In baptism, our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another. And we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens. We are citizens of heaven living here in our secular age."

If this is true, and I think it's undeniable that the church is or should be a distinct community of people who commit to living in a particular way in the midst of a sea of people who have not made the same commitment, then that brings up questions. What is essential about our faith? What is it that we have to share? Our society may regard commitment to a church as an optional add-on to someone's life, something that they may or may not choose to engage in. And the church may gather in various ways as we learned during the pandemic, online, in small groups, in homes, and so forth. A church building, beautiful though it is, is not essential. But the church itself, our call to follow Christ, our commitment to putting his commandments into action in our lives, that is essential to our world because we are the bearers of God's love to the world, the proclaimers of the good news of Jesus Christ. We are called to share the good news of God's love because it is essential in our world, which seems passionately devoted to anything but love.

So, if we believe that our faith is essential, how do we achieve what I call the pillars of God's mission in the church, discipleship, evangelism, and service? How do we grow in our Christian faith ourselves? That's discipleship. How do we share it with others so that they also can understand the essential good news of Christ? That's evangelism. And how do we put it into action so that the world can clearly see the essentials of faith as it plays out? Which is service. To these questions, our scriptures have a lot to say. In our gospel reading, we are continuing Jesus' last words to his disciples the night before he dies. He's told them in the gospel you may have heard last Sunday, that he is the way and the truth and the life. And if they follow him, they will find their way to the Father.

Today, he continues with his great promise to send the Holy Spirit to be their advocate, the one who comforts them, who walks alongside them, who assures them of God's presence, but also sends them out on mission. And he says this, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." So what commandments are those? Well, Jesus has just said in the gospel of John what the great commandment is. "Love one another as I have loved you." That's it. That is the absolute commitment that Christians make. The commitment to love, which our baptismal vows make concrete, which you'll be renewing alongside our confirmands and those being received and reaffirmed in a moment. This is a commitment to love that is active, that is decisive, that puts the wellbeing of others before our own wellbeing. Those commitments of our Christian life spell out what love looks like for all of our neighbors.

Those commitments should make us look different from the divided and angry world around us. The world that seems to thrive on angry polemic as long as it has entertainment value. We might dress the same as others. We might do the same jobs. We might watch the same TV shows, read the same books, speak the same language as everyone else, but we in the church are called to model ourselves after Jesus because our greatest commandment as a beachhead of heaven is not power, money, or success, but love. If we are Christians, we should be changed by love and we should act with love in every interaction and relationship of our lives. We should do this clearly and emphatically in the name of Jesus because he gave us the law of love: Sacrificial, self-giving love, the kind of love that he gave to us. Love not just for our families and people who look and act like us, but love for others who are strangers to us, who are much different from ourselves because they are people that God loves.

People should be able to look at us and say, "There is something different about them. She always acts with consideration. He always treats people with respect. She

refuses to say an unkind word about anyone. They refuse to do an unethical act. They make personal sacrifices for the sake of others and for the sake of the world God loves. They go outside themselves to make a positive difference in the world." That quality of love should show in every part of our lives says Jesus. Not that we are perfect at it. God knows we all fall down. Heaven knows that we make mistakes, but our Christian commitment is to always return to the God who made us and who loves us, to ask for forgiveness, and to try again to love. That's the Christian way. That's how we are distinct in a secular world. That's how we pursue our mission of proclaiming the good news of Christ. We do it by loving God and loving our neighbor and giving ourselves for each other because that's what Jesus has done for us.

And this world surely needs that commitment to love right now. We live in a world that is increasingly falling into division and fear. Sometimes I fear that our civil society is falling apart, but I believe that Christ brings good news to us and to our world. The Christian message says that God loves us so much that Jesus entered into our world and became vulnerable to death out of love for us, that God's life triumphed over death and Jesus makes us the promise of eternal and abundant life. The Christian message says that there is no darkness so deep that God's light cannot shine into it and bring hope and joy and peace and love. The Christian message says that reconciliation, not division, is God's will and God's hope for this world. That's the message that I believe our church has to share. That's the message that I believe our divided world needs to hear. That's the message that it could encourage our world to count on love instead of division and hope instead of despair.

I believe that you here at St. James have an amazing opportunity to share God's love with others. You're doing dedicated work through your Christian formation program so that all ages can develop their faith and become closer disciples of Jesus. You're sharing the good news with others, 12 of whom will be confirming and receiving and reaffirming in a few minutes. And the generosity and service to others in the community that St. James is known for is an essential way that you put love into action for the benefit of your neighbors. Living the life of love, integrity, and reconciliation that God calls us to is another way that we put God's love into action. Living the kind of life that recognizes that every person has inherent dignity and value, and every relationship is a sign of God's love. That is how we put into practice our call to live as God's resident aliens here on earth, to passionately and faithfully demonstrate Christ's way of love.

Amen.