There is a story attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu with which I have identified many times over my ministry, but no more so than today. After worship, Tutu’s young daughter asked, “Why do you kneel down to say a prayer every time before you preach?” Tutu replied, “To ask God to make my sermon better.” “Well, Daddy,” came the response, “why doesn’t he?” Given a heart overflowing with gratitude for the blessing of serving in this parish, I pray that some measure of God’s grace may flow between us through this homily.

The context of the first reading from Samuel sounds like it could come from today’s headlines. The people of Israel, having been led out of slavery in Egypt, had arrived in the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, sustained by God, and forged into a community under God’s rule that is intended to be a light to the nations. Despite God’s faithfulness in delivering them from enemies and adversity, the people lose faith in Samuel, the aging prophet who had served as God’s spokesperson, because of the abuses of his sons. The elders among them came to Samuel and asked him to appoint a king to rule over them, choosing to put their trust in a “strong man” to protect them from their enemies instead of listening for God’s voice. Samuel is naturally offended by this demand, but the LORD tells him, “They are not rejecting you, but me. Listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

Several weeks ago our Presiding Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry and Jim Wallis of Sojourners Community led a delegation of elders from various Christian denominations who marched to the White House to make a confession of faith in a time of crisis. They read a letter at the gate of the White House which began by noting that we are “…living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches.”

In the tradition of the Biblical prophets, the statement Reclaiming Jesus rejects white nationalism and racism; misogyny, language that debases and abandons the poor and those considered to be “outsiders”; the practice and pattern of lying that is invading political and civil life; moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule; and the theological heresy of “America first”. Our elders write, “We are deeply concerned for the soul of our nation, but also for our churches and the integrity of our faith. The church is always subject to temptations to power, to cultural conformity, and to racial, class and gender divides. However, the present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; deeper into our relationship with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; deeper into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.”
While this parish is big enough to embrace members with differing political points of view, I am proud that it is deeply committed to addressing the moral issues that demand our attention and challenging people of all political sides to work for justice for all of God’s creation. Whether that witness has been made through studying theological issues and standing for inclusiveness, or through partnerships with Christians around the globe, or by building justice via Greater Cleveland Congregations, to feeding the hungry, and welcoming the formerly incarcerated through Edwins, St. Paul’s Church seeks to answer the call to love God, love your neighbor, and change the world. I give thanks to God that you expect your clergy to address issues that take seriously our prayer that God’s kingdom may come on earth as in heaven, even when the prevailing winds of partisanship would have us avoid issues that threaten to divide us.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus has attracted a large crowd—including the guardians of the religious establishment—because he has inaugurated a ministry of healing and teaching that elevates being compassionate over religious piety. David Lose writes, “Jesus sets himself against all the powers that would rob humanity and creation of the abundant life God intends. At the heart of his vision and way is the conviction that God is love, that God desires the health and healing of all creation, that God stands both with us and for us, that God is determined to love and redeem us no matter what the cost, and that this God chooses to be accessible to us, to all of us—indeed, to anyone and everyone.” Is it any wonder that some speculated, “He has gone out of his mind.” Or that his family, fearful of what might happen to him and maybe to themselves, comes to pull him out of the public spotlight?

With retirement comes a need to pack up belongings and even unload a lot of them. If I didn’t admit it before, this process reminded me that I have tendencies to be a pack rat. But going through some files last week I found a bulletin cover for a theological education Sunday when I was in Divinity School. On it was this story:

“Once upon a time a great king ruled over a lovely land across the sea. It was a land of peace, tranquility, of joy and warmth, until the terrible day the messengers brought bad news. ‘The harvest has been poisoned,’ they said. ‘If any one eat of the harvest he will go insane forever.’

The king, struck down by the news, called together his counsellors to decide what to do. ‘If we do not distribute the harvest to the people, they will starve and die,’ the king said. ‘But if we do distribute the harvest every man, woman, and child in this land will go insane forever. What can we do?’

Through the night the king and his counsellors struggled with the bad news and in the morning came to the only conclusion possible: they would distribute the harvest in the full knowledge that henceforth every man, woman, and child in the nation, themselves included, would go insane forever. But as the king gave that fateful order, he also gave another: ‘Let us now set aside a few of us, a very few of us, who will always remember that we are after all insane.’

Perhaps we are those very few, called to remember, called to believe in another world, a lovely world, a world of sanity and peace and joy. In the midst of our insanity, we are asked
to see the King of glory, to recognize him who promises that better world, that world of vision, hope, and dream.”

Over fifty years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking in this nave put it this way. “We all want to live the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic personalities, but I must be honest with you by saying that there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted, and to which I call all people of good will to be maladjusted until the good society is realized.” Dr. King’s list included segregation and discrimination; religious bigotry; economic conditions that take necessities from the many and give luxuries to the few; militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.

He called for the immediate formation of a new organization, “The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment.” This Association would stand on the shoulders of the prophet Amos who called for “justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream”; of Abraham Lincoln who saw that this nation could not exist half-slave and half-free; of Jefferson, who in a nation adjusted to slavery, could still write, “all men are created equal”; and Jesus of Nazareth, who living in a land occupied by the Roman empire boldly declared, “He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword,” and cried out, “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.” King wrote, “Through such maladjustment, we will be able to emerge from the darkened midnight of man’s inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.”

Time is not sufficient and my words are woefully inadequate to express the fullness of my heart for the friendships we have made and experiences—both joyful and sad—that we have shared in these past twelve years. It is nothing less than a gift of God to find oneself called to a community led by Christ’s Spirit, but that is what we have shared. In the world’s eyes, one has to be a little crazy to follow Jesus on the way of love that led to the cross, but then to resurrection. I thank you for inviting me to walk this way with you and pray that God’s powerful Spirit of love will continue to guide you on this path. Jesus’ way of suffering love will always be perceived as madness by the world around us which is fixated on power, security, and control. However, as we follow Jesus’ way he promises nothing less than that we, and the world around us, will grow into the image of our lifegiving, liberating, and loving God for whom nothing is impossible.

Martin Luther wrote, “We are not yet what we shall be but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road.” And so I leave you with this blessing,

“Life is short
and we do not have too much time
to gladden the hearts
of those who travel the way with us;
So be swift to love
and make haste to be kind.
And may the blessing of the One
who made us,
who loves us,
and who travels with us,
Be upon you, and those you love dearly,
this day and always. Amen.