

Why am I wearing pink you ask?

This is Gaudete or “Rejoice” Sunday. Intended to give a break in the middle of our season of preparation, we are encouraged to both listen to John the Baptist calling on us to prepare the way, and to joyfully prepare for the coming of our savior. You may remember last week I spoke about the need to balance both joyful expectation, and introspection, so we are ready for a new year. This Sunday is supposed to give use that balance.

In our collect today, we pray for God to “Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.”

As Jesus prepared for his ministry, John’s disciples were looking for a warrior king, or a learned scribe or priest. Jesus and John knew each of their roles, and respected them. To signify the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, his baptism by John began a transition between them. John needed to make it clear that Jesus is the messiah, that it is indeed He his disciples needed to follow.

Some continue to look for such a powerful messiah in our day and age. His second coming in fearful power and majesty is described by Zechariah, and includes not just military defeat, but a terrible plague on all who oppose God. The book of Revelation is full of frightening images of great battles and wars that signify the end of the work. There will be a lake of fire that will be the receptacle for all who are not faithful to God, whose works are evil. Zechariah 4 and Revelation 19:11-21

I find it hard to reconcile the love that Jesus preaches with the fearful images of Zechariah and Revelation.

Everyday there are reports of human brutality. Mass shootings are so frequent they don't really make the news so much anymore. We turn those who are seeking help as promised in international treaties on refugees not just away, but they are sent back into violence, or imprisoned, and separated from family members.

Our country finds itself divided – by what we perceive as complete misunderstandings on the part of the other half. We don't seem to try to see each other's point of view. How can we reconcile our differences? Where do we look for help in understanding each other?

How do we get back to a place where it is safe to go to school, and church, and to the market? Where, politics may be discussed at a family gathering without risking division.

John the Baptist asked Christ, "Are you the one we have waited for, or must we look for another?" Christ's answer was to show proof that he is the Messiah. But he didn't answer, "See my great army, all the chariots, weapons, and horses!" No, He said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Think about that last statement. "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." That statement speaks to our loss of a sense of wellbeing. If we assume that

someone is taking offense, the natural assumption that follows is one of threat, and a need for self-defense. With the proliferation of news about violence, suddenly that is in our living rooms. Our whole society seems to be overwhelmed by the stories. Many have become hypervigilant. Jesus blessed those that did not find him to be a threat. He seems to be encouraging us to take a stance of not finding offense, not just in Him, but in his message of love.

We are a nation that likes to study things. We look at causes, and sometimes we take action based on those studies.

I was watching a news show on public TV this last week. They presented the findings of some social researchers that were trying to get a handle on the increase in violence in our society. And they found a link between courtesy, or rather the lack of courtesy, and violence. When people treat each other, in the main, with kindness, deference, and just plain old courtesy, the tendency toward violence goes down. And the assumption that someone is out to hurt you goes down as well. With that the threat level diminishes.

Nationally, violence is being treated as a disease, an epidemic. Interventions are directed toward causes. Things like misunderstandings, taking offence and acting

with violence to remedy a perceived insult or slight have been shown to be causal factors in acts of retribution. Understanding between parties is the treatment. And often leads to disarmament, understanding, and de-escalation of violence.

Chicago is one of the most violent cities on earth right now. Task forces participate in interventions, when there is a violent act contact is made with all parties to talk to those involved and to attempt to have each side heard, and establish a commitment toward forgiveness and reconciliation. They showed a team that went to both parties in a street shooting, and listened to each side. They actually found common ground, brought the two groups together and talked it out. An agreement was made to stop assuming offense, and talk first, shoot last, bringing a new level of peace to an neighborhood.

That report gave me hope that one day we'll treat our neighbors with love, and tolerance. One day perhaps we'll arm ourselves with peace instead of guns. Love instead of hatred.

What does this have to do with Grand Ledge? Do we fear violence here, in our little, quiet town?

How are we treating our neighbors? Do we treat them with love, understanding?

We have a young person who has been shooting out windows in buildings with a BB gun, including ours. He needs our prayers. Somehow, he needs to know that he isn't as bad as he thinks he is. He needs understanding, and he needs to know that he has caused injury. His actions are not without consequences – and he needs to change how he expressing his feelings. And he needs to know that God loves him too.