

After Adolf Hitler was democratically elected by the German people, he systematically dismantled the German democracy, taking over the schools and media, then creating his personal army, the Gestapo. Hitler also controlled the church, sacralizing Nazi beliefs under the name of Christ. In 1934, a group gathered in Barmen. They believed that the severity of this crisis called for a confession of faith, one that rejected Nazism and reclaimed the biblical truth. The Barmen Declaration is comprised of six sections, each of which begins with a Bible verse, followed by a brief reflection of the biblical truth for the church, and then a rejection of Nazi teaching. This morning, we consider the sixth and last section, so I invite you to join me in the responsive reading.

(Barmen Declaration)

I want to examine the Barmen Declaration in light of scripture, as the authors intended. Specific to this section is the second letter from Paul to Timothy. The Apostle Paul was a powerful, learned man, teaching and following the Torah, who was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Yet even after his conversion, he felt insufficient to his calling. He referred to the thorn in his flesh and reported that God would not remove it (2 Cor 12:7-9).

What was this thorn in his flesh? Scholars have speculated that it was a physical malady, but Paul endured numerous physical hardships, including beatings and imprisonment. It would be challenging to pinpoint just one! Perhaps I am projecting my bias, but I wonder if this thorn wasn't the nagging feeling that he wasn't doing enough.

This week marks 80 years since the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan. Since then, people have used the ancient tradition of origami, the folding of paper, to lament this tragedy by creating cranes, which represent peace. My friend, Alan, recently wrote this poem: "I fold a thousand origami cranes for peace, worrying a thousand is nowhere near enough." The thorn in my side is a similar sense of "not enough."

The war in Gaza, and particularly the starvation of its people, has outraged many of us. Tens of millions of other people are starving in Haiti and South Sudan. Here in Chatham County, one out of every five children suffer from food insecurity. But what can one person do?

This past week, I helped compose a letter to our North Carolina elected leaders regarding the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Like the Barmen Declaration, we aimed

to articulate how our Christian faith compels us to reject the current policies. What's more, through Chatham Chuckwagon and CORA, we help feed people in our community. Still, I kept wondering, "Is this enough?"

Although only partially quoted in Barmen, it is instructive to look at in the wider context of Paul's counsel to Timothy. He began this letter with a greeting, then he quickly moved to exhortation: "God did not impart to us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim 1:7). In Greek, "cowardice" meant to shrink back or pull away from the situation. Instead, Paul taught loving resolve. It is active effort. However, Paul clarified that such fearless resolve is from God.

The Barmen Declaration quotes only the second part of 2 Timothy 2:9. The entire verse presents a play on words—Paul says that, while he is chained or fettered, the Word of God is unchained or unfettered. While powers of this world can imprison and send to concentration camps, God will never be subject to human control. The Word of God that is Jesus Christ overcame death-dealing authorities with life, and his life is the salvation of the world. Anne Lamott puts it beautifully:

Love and mercy are sovereign, if often in disguise as ordinary people.... Over and over, in spite of our awfulness, we are forgiven and included. When we experience this, that we are in this with one another, flailing and starting over in the awful beauty of being humans together, we are saved.

God promised that grace and mercy would be enough, for nothing awful or tragic would alter the hugeness of divine love. This love would have the last say, as Jesus promised to be with us to the end of the age (Matt 28:20). The last word will not be our cruelty, hate, or evil, but mercy, love, and forgiveness. The thorn in our flesh, or the nagging feeling that you and I are not enough, is paradoxically the way to salvation, for recognizing our limitations and shortcomings, we turn to God, and in so doing, we turn to each other.

I recently learned about a man named *Jesus*, who fled persecution in Venezuela, seeking asylum in the United States. In 2021, he joined his family in Imperial, Pennsylvania, half an hour outside Pittsburgh. He is an engineer by training, but his qualifications were lacking for that job here in the United States. *Jesus* worked late hours at convenience stores while also learning English. It seemed his hard work was paying off when he was accepted into an apprenticeship program—*Jesus* wanted to become a carpenter.

He is also a man of faith. He gave food to the needy, and when a communal garden was created to forge ties between a mostly white church and his Latino one, *Jesus* was there, tilling the ground, repairing a faulty tiller, and watering the plants twice a week.

As required every six months, *Jesus* willingly complied with ICE protocols by checking in at the Pittsburgh field office. But on July 8, he was detained and sent to a center in another part of the state. *Jesus's* detention resembles thousands of other stories, but his story has inspired local faith and business leaders, including the bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, to write letters to elected officials on behalf of *Jesus*. Will those letters set him free? Will it be enough?

I believe that words on behalf of Jesus Christ, the carpenter's son and the Word of God, make a difference, not because of the genius of their human origin but because of God's Spirit that moves through us. Like the writers of Barmen, now is the time for us to speak out against cruelty and speak up for the vulnerable. Now is not the time for cowardice but to speak the truth to power.

2 Timothy contains similar words of exhortation, yet I tell you the most moving part for me. At the end of the letter, after using familiar if clichéd metaphors to fight the good fight and finish the race, Paul asked Timothy to bring a couple of personal items, "above all the parchments" (2 Tim 4:13). Paul wanted a pen and paper. At the end of his life, Paul kept writing. We can do the same: emails to elected officials, signatures on petitions, and letters to the editor. We can preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary, use words.

I was writing this sermon when a young neighbor rang the doorbell, sending the dog into a barking frenzy. This three-year-old moppet was more like a cat, who couldn't decide whether he wanted to be inside or outside. Every time, I let him in, he jubilantly banged on the piano. Every time, I let him out, he joyfully rang the doorbell. The dog was losing her blessed mind.

This child confessed that he wanted something to eat. He took his sweet time surveying the available snack foods in our pantry. When he finally selected a granola bar, he promptly rejected it once I had opened the wrapper, revealing the flavor. Eventually, he picked another kind, but rather than sitting at the table to eat, or even better, taking his snack home, the boy wanted to sit next to me and bang on my computer with the same exuberance as he hit the piano keys. I gave up the sermon. I got out the blocks, and as the dog and I supervised his building of a tower, I thought about how love is patient, how John Steinbeck claimed that it does

no good to know that a million people are starving if you don't personally know one hungry person, how according to the carpenter's son the kingdom of heaven is the exclusive domain of children and children at heart, and how what appears to be a thorn in my side might actually be a pathway to grace, and just enough.