December 1st, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Advent I: Hope

10:30 am

Swords into Plowshares

1. Start with Claiborne video
2. It’s Not Always Sunny in Philadelphia

Shane Claiborne is a name that I’ve been familiar with for about ten years now. Shane grew up in the south, in at least an upper-middle-class household and then went to Eastern University, a Christian university which is outside Philadelphia in something called the ‘Main Line’ area, which is also known for elite doctors and lawyers that commute into the city. Yet Shane dared to go into the city, in fact, into one of the most dangerous areas I know of, a neighbor called Kensington.

 I went to University right outside of Philadelphia as well, and it was a known fact: you do not go into Kensington in the northern part of the city. You make a point to detour around this part of the city. Shane didn’t do that, he went into Kensington and he saw the pain, and he left his upper-middle class life to live alongside the homeless. He created an organization called, ‘The Simple Way’ and ever since, he has been an activist and author.

 As some of you know, I served as a trauma chaplain for a year at the Hospital of University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia, also known not to be a great area to hang out. I remember working shifts where the norm overnight trauma would be 8 gun shots, and that was...a good night for us. I distinctly remember being in the trauma bay and there was a young man, must have been early 20s, who was shot in the leg, and the doctor went over to tell him that it was a superficial shot – in others words, he didn’t need surgery, the bullet would actually come out by itself. What was so poignant for me in speaking to this young 20-ish year old man and he was apathetic, he said, “This isn’t the first time I’ve been shot, probably not the last.” It was normal to him. But it shouldn’t be normal. It shouldn’t be normal to patch up your arguments with a gun, to prove a point with by taking a shot. It isn’t the kind of world Christ is calling us into, and we see this right in Isaiah’s prophecy of making swords into plowshares.

III. Instruments of War

 The line that strikes me the most in this video is when Shane says that there is hope in, “turning instruments of death into tools for life and for peace.” What a stunning vision, what a beautiful call, what a transformative moment of hope. This January, we will be starting a Social Justice Book Group and our first book will be Claiborne’s, “Beating Guns” and I’d ask you to join us after worship on January 12th to talk about how we will start this group. I invite you to the conversation of how we will organize the meetings, what we wish to discuss, and when and how often we will gather together. This is an important part of our ministry as we seek to be a church that lives out the call of the Gospel in fruitful and tangible ways, through education, discussion, and action.

1. Beyond guns

The sermon up until this point has been about guns being turned into garden tools. But, as I think deeply upon Isaiah’s hopes and vision for the future, I wonder what else can be turned from wickedness into healthfulness, harm into good, death into life. What are the things that you and I can live into, as we live in Sykesville, as we experience our day to day lives?

 It’s a really tough questions, and I will fully admit that I myself have a hard time answering it, no matter how much time or reflection I’ve tried to put into thinking more deeply. Here’s one way I could see myself turning swords into plowshares:

 Turning a word of meanness or hatred or unkindness to a word that chooses love, compassion, and wholeness. We all know that words have a biting edge, and whether that’s in conversation or behind a computer screen, we can all say things that are unkind. Perhaps we placate ourselves, thinking that we know better, that this person deserves the cutting word – and maybe it’s true, maybe there are people who need called out. But ultimately, being unkind doesn’t create change – meeting people where they are and knowing that there is another story that we do not know, their experience, their trauma, their life that has influenced their action – meeting them there is where we need to start. So, yes, we take our swords, our words, and transform them into words that are life giving and hopeful.

 So my charge to you today, is by no means an easy one. It might take all of advent, it might take longer, but I implore you – what are the ways you and I can take those things that cause trouble, create problems, and are instruments of death – how can we transform this world into one of peace, love, and hope. How can we bring the Kingdom, Isaiah’s beautiful vision and prophecy, into our world today? The questions are hard, but they should be, as we long and wait for Christ, our King in a cradle, to come among us. Amen.