

Bother How

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- [0 : 0 0] Hello friends, it's Pastor Anthony Parrott here at The Table Church, and here we are again, yet another week where we are grief-stricken and sad and angry and anxious because of things going on in our city, in this city, and in our nation.
- And I'm getting really sick and tired of, you know, feeling like we gotta keep addressing all of the just awfulness that keeps happening, and I think we're all feeling pretty sick and tired of it.
- So, here we are, and you have decided to come to church in the way that, you know, the way that we can right now. What do we say? What do we do? How do we respond?
- So, let's begin first with some words of prayer. I offer up these words of prayer knowing that prayer is not enough, but vocabulary, language, the words that we put on our tongue can soak into our souls and help shape us and influence us and move us.
- So that when we pray, we move our feet. When we pray, we take action. When we pray, we're shaped and formed into the kind of people who make heaven crash joyfully down into earth.
- [1 : 2 6] So, I invite you to pray these words along with me. They were composed by a couple other folks. The credits are on the screen. You can find them in the books that they reference.
- Let's pray. How can I confess for my nation? God, I am asking because I really don't know. I don't have a ton of positive regard for it at present.
- My confession is actually a complaint because the list of sins it commits against you and me and my beloved are the same. Creator, descend from your holy place and do something. My ethical commitments stop me from preying violence on people. So, maybe use enough sacred force to get the atrocities to stop.
- Redistribute resources stored by those who've harmed us for the sake of our healing. Take what was ill gained by our oppressors and give it back to the people.
- May those possessing wisdom and strategy become known to you so we can create restorative systems of provision so none of us ever experience this lack again.
- [2 : 4 1] Deliver us from the oligarchs who manipulate laws, economies, and policies for their profit. Give to us profits who will bring hidden horrors to our consciousness, who cast vision for a better way of being so that when we pursue liberation, our freedom seeking is communal and complete.
- Christ our King, our world is overtaken by unexpected calamity. By a host of attending fears, worries, and insecurities.
- We witness suffering, confusion, and hardship multiplied around us and we find ourselves swept up in these same anxieties and troubles. We witness, dismayed by so many uncertainties.
- So now we turn to you, O God, in this season of our common distress. Be merciful, O Christ, to those who suffer, to those who worry, to those who grieve, to those who are threatened or harmed in any way by this upheaval.

Let your holy compassions be active throughout the world, even now, tending the afflicted, comforting the brokenhearted, and bringing hope to the many who are hopeless.

[3 : 57] Use even these hardships to woo our hearts nearer to you, O God. Indeed, O Creator, may these days of disquiet become a catalyst.

A catalyst for conviction and repentance, for the tendering of our affections, for the stirring of our sympathies, for the refining of our love. Indeed, O Lord, let us love now more fearlessly, remembering that you created us and appointed us to live in these very places, in the midst of these unsettled times.

It is no surprise to you that we are here now, sharing in this turmoil along with the rest of our society. For you have called us, your children, to live as salt and light among the nations, praying for and laboring for the flourishing of the communities where we dwell, acting as the agents of your forgiveness, the agents of salvation, of healing, of reconciliation, and hope in the very midst of an often troubled world.

And in these holy vocations, you have not left us helpless, O Lord, because you have not left us at all. Your Spirit remains among us. Inhabit now your church, O Spirit of the risen Christ.

Unite and equip your people for the work before them. Creator, empower us to live as your children. In these times of distress, let us respond not as those who would instinctively entrench for our own self-preservation, but rather as those who, in imitation of you, would move in humble obedience towards the needs and hurts of our neighborhoods and our communities.

[5 : 42] You are not ashamed to share in our sufferings, Jesus. Let us now be willing to share in yours, serving as your visible witness in this broken world.

We, your people, know the good and glorious end of the story. Our hope is secure. In this time of widespread suffering, then, let us rest afresh in the surpassing peace of that vision, that your whole church on earth might be liberated to live more generously and sacrificially.

Now labor in and through us, O Lord, extending and multiplying the many expressions of your mercy. Amen. Last week, we started a series called Why Bother?

And we were exploring the idea of why bother with Jesus and with Christianity and with the church when it's so evident and obvious that it is messed up.

And we're kind of changing, I mean, we're changing the plan from what the sermon is going to be this week, but we're going to stay on kind of the same topic. Why bother?

[6 : 52] Let's be clear. What we saw in D.C. this week was the result of Christians and Christianity and the church.

We can't say, oh, this isn't like us. We can't say, oh, this isn't American. We can't say, oh, you know, the church would never support things like this.

It did. It is. It has. It's very, very easy for me to want to point fingers and to point the blame, to say it's something about them out there.

It's us versus them. Remember that. And not one to own and repent the things and the places and the theologies that I myself have been a part of and have shared in and have shared with others.

I want to be clear as well that this lies entirely the fault of the white church. Our black brothers and sisters and churches of people of color have long been telling us of the dangers of mixing nationalism with Christianity.

[8 : 16] And if the wider church in America had listened to their voices long ago, we would not be in the place that we're in right now.

So we ask, why bother? We ask, why do we keep coming back to church? Why do we keep bringing up the name of Jesus when it seems so clear and so obvious and so evident that it brings so much harm?

And last week we explored the idea that we must be clear about our questions. We bother because what we believe, the gospel, the good news that Jesus was God in the flesh and came to bring reconciliation and hope to the world.

What Jesus proclaimed is the kingdom of God. That what God wants to be true in heaven and on earth will come together. That Christ has died and has been resurrected.

That the new creation is breaking forth right now. We bother because it's true. So the question I want to ask and try to answer this week is, how bother?

[9 : 24] How do we bother? Because clearly we want to. We wouldn't be here right now if we didn't bother. So how do we bother? How do we move on from here when it seems so evident and obvious that there is something wrong and diseased and sick with our country?

And with many, many, many folks who claim the name of Jesus, how do we bother? How do we move forward? How do we make this better?

So a few thoughts. Number one, we have to identify what we've lost and grieve it. We love, I love, I'll speak for myself, to jump to anger, to rage, to frustration.

And I love to skip over the grief part of loss. We have these expectations that if we were clear in our denunciation of white supremacy, if we were clear in our trying to say how bad things could get, if we were clear that things could change, that things would get better, we had an idea of what the world could be like, and we were disappointed again and again and again to the point of insurrection and domestic terrorism and the loss of life.

And so what we are grieving is a loss of what we thought could be. And so when we jump immediately to the anger and the rage, we are not letting our souls and our emotions do the work of grief.

[11 : 10] Because we can't heal from what we're grieving if we don't grieve. And so we need to name and identify what it is we've lost so that we can grieve it. We are disillusioned.

I am disillusioned with those who I thought knew better. Who I thought had higher morals and higher ideals, and that when presented with facts and with truth, would actually, you know, do something with those facts.

We're disillusioned with the fact that truth and meaning have seemed to lost all meaning. That's a lot to grieve. That's a lot to mourn. So we've got to start with that mourning.

We've got to start with that grieving, because if we don't, it will turn toxic and insidious within us. It will take root into grudges and bitterness. And like we talked about before, that eventually just starts this enemy making a cycle again and again and again.

So we identify our loss and we grieve it. Number two, we have to understand our limits. Limits are not something we love to talk about.

[12 : 18] Limits imply weakness. Limits imply that it's a denunciation of the American dream. You can be whatever you want to be. Limits means that I can't be whatever I want to be.

I can't do whatever I want to do. I am human. I am mortal. I can only do so much. But when I begin to recognize that I can only do so much, then I can become more clear on what my job actually is.

It is not my job to fix everything and everybody. When I see masses storm the Capitol, when I see a big part of our population deny historic and current systems of oppression, when I see people mangle the name of Jesus and use the Lord's name in vain to propagate their own power and authority and agendas, I can't fix that.

It can't be my job. Because I have limits. You have limits. So we have to know our limits and recognize that we can't, on our own, fix everything and everybody by ourselves.

We love to start with the world, change the world first, and then eventually if I have time, I'll change myself. And of course, that's a path towards madness.

[13 : 41] It's a path towards, you know, being corrupted by the world-changing power that we seek. We have to know our own limits, know our own selves, and allow the God of mercy and grace to do the work of transformation and redemption in us so that we can become world-changing agents for good in the world.

So we identify our loss. We grieve it. We know our limits. And then number three, we know our values. There are some values that we all need to keep and cling on to and hold on to.

We will always speak the truth. I think that's a pretty good value. And yes, I'm aware of confirmation biases and all of these things that have pushed us further and further away from whatever truth with capital T is.

But we have to make truth a value to begin with. Truth ranks higher than power. Truth ranks higher than influence. Truth needs to rank higher than our own agendas.

Truth has to rank pretty darn high on our list of values. Another value is not embracing violence as a tool. That has to get up there pretty high.

[14 : 57] That violence is not going to be the way that we find solutions. Violence is not going to be the way that we declare and proclaim and enact God's kingdom, God's rule, God's reign, God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

A value of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. That we will treat others as we want to be treated. That we will not marginalize and send away those that don't look or think or act or speak like us.

But rather, we will ask, how can we love them well? Because we identify our loss and we grieve it. We know our limits. We know our values. And then we can know our role and embrace it.

When we know what we've lost and can grieve it. When we know that we can't be everything to everybody. We can't save the world by ourselves. And when we know what we stand for.

Then we can embrace our God-given role and vocation. That God wants to use us for to bring some good and some beauty into the world.

[16 : 03] So, what are some roles that we could have? And this, I think, is maybe the one thing I want you to take away today.

Is that you will have different roles. Depending on where you are in life. How old you are. And what position you have. And who you're rubbing shoulders with. You don't have to have all the roles.

There are lots of different roles to have. And I want to explore some of the roles that show up within Scripture. That we can have when we are wanting to make the world a better place.

When we are wanting to bother with fixing what is broken and diseased and wrong. With this thing called the church. With this thing called Christianity. Here in America.

There are different roles that we each can play. Right now. Maybe something different later. But knowing our role and embracing that role for today. So, just some ideas from Scripture.

[17 : 01] An idea would be the idea of resisting from within. There are those of us who are called to stay in evangelicalism.

To stay in conservative expressions of faith. To stay in white Christianity. To stay in black Christianity. To stay in wherever it is you are right now.

To stay in the world. To stay in the world. And serve as a force of resistance from within. So that you can change it from within. I think about a story from 1 Kings chapter 18.

It's during the reign of Ahab. And Ahab was known to be one of the most evil kings that Israel had had. And Obadiah is a palace administrator for King Ahab.

And Obadiah and Elijah have this conversation about each other. And it's revealed that Obadiah had been charged by Ahab to go and kill all of the prophets of Yahweh.

[18 : 04] All the prophets of God. But Obadiah instead had secretly hidden away dozens of God's prophets instead of killing them. Obadiah found out that God's will for him was to not just leave Ahab.

Not just to leave the palace. Not just to immediately abandon this particularly rotten evil king. But to serve as a force for good and resistance from within. I think about Luke chapter 8.

We get a list of some of the women who are the financial supporters of Jesus' earthly ministry. And one of them is a woman named Joanna. She's actually referred to later in the book of Romans as Junia.

And Joanna is the wife of the manager of Herod's household. Herod was kind of a puppet king for the Jews of the Romans. And Herod is a pretty nasty guy.

He was pretty obsessed with himself. He loved his name and his fame more than just about anything else. And the Jews kind of hated this guy because Herod would constantly sell them out so that he could keep a good reputation with the empire.

[19 : 15] And so Joanna, Junia, her husband manages Herod's household. And Junia is helping Jesus' ministry financially supporting it.

She's basically supporting this little insurrectionist ministry of Jesus, an upside-down insurrection. It's all about giving life and healing and all of that. But she's financially supporting Jesus while her family is working inside Herod's household.

She's resisting from within. In Romans, Junia is eventually called an esteemed apostle, one of the founding members of the church.

In Luke chapter 7, we read about this centurion. So somebody who works for the Roman army, the occupying army of Israel, of Rome in Israel.

And there's a centurion who needs a servant to be healed. And the Jews speak highly of the centurion, saying that the centurion loved the Jewish nation and actually assisted them in the building of their synagogue, their religious center.

[20 : 21] And so the centurion, who is ostensibly supposed to be the occupying force for Rome, is instead helping the Jews worship their God.

So one of the possible roles that you can serve is to resist from within. Not everybody is called to leave, to abandon, to jump ship from the problematic and oppressive churches that they're a part of.

Some of y'all are called to stick with it and resist from within. And I think that's a legitimate calling. Another legitimate calling, kind of alongside this, is the idea of civil disobedience.

And I think it's important to mention civil disobedience, because oftentimes Romans 13 can be thrown around as an excuse to do whatever the government tells us to do. But there are lots and lots and lots of biblical examples of those who were part of oppressive regimes.

And they felt the need to resist those oppressive regimes through civil disobedience. We've got to think of Exodus chapter 1 and Exodus chapter 2. We see Shipra, Pua, and Jochebed, these Israelite midwives and the mother of Moses, who rejected and refused to obey Pharaoh's charge to kill all of the baby boys born of the Israelite people.

[21 : 42] It's civil disobedience. They showed the way of how to disobey authority. We think of Daniel and Shadrach and Meshach and Begnavot, who were told to pledge allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, to bow down and pray to his statue.

And they refused and risked their lives to do so. We think of John and Peter in Acts chapter 5, who were brought before the religious authorities and told to no longer use the name of Jesus.

And John and Peter say, we must obey God rather than humans. Now, our black brothers and sisters know the stories of civil disobedience well, because it was a necessary way for civil rights to become a thing in this country.

So, we got a quote, letter from Birmingham jail by Martin Luther King Jr. He says, The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws, just and unjust.

And I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, King says, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

[23 : 01] I would agree with St. Augustine that an unjust law is no law at all. Church, listen to me. We have to be the discerning community of people who know when to disobey.

The fact that our country has decided that we're not going to let any refugees in doesn't mean that the church should just go along with that. When there are people who are in danger, who are in need, who are in need of help, the church has a responsibility to step up no matter what the government says.

Friends, you heard it here on camera, friends. Another possible role that we can play is to brush the dust off of our feet.

Now, this phrase, to brush the dust off of your feet, comes from Jesus' book of Matthew chapter 10. And he's giving instructions to his disciples who are going to go throughout the region and proclaim the news, the gospel, that God's kingdom is showing up on earth as it is in heaven.

And Jesus says, And then Jesus says this, Friends, this is something I need a lot of you to hear.

[24 : 30] It's not your responsibility to change everybody's mind. You are not going to convince every person that you know or run into that racism exists, that Christian nationalism is a sin, that homophobia is wrong.

You're not going to do it. Sorry, but it's true. And so there comes a point where it's okay to shake the dust off of our feet to say, I cannot take on the burden of changing your mind.

It's okay to say that. It's a hard thing because that can often mean breaks in relationships. That can often mean the ending of beautiful things.

But when we are bashing our heads against the wall in order to make someone understand, I think quite often we're no longer living in God's intention for our lives. It's not our job to convict people.

It's not our job to change their minds. We have to have the non-anxious presence to be able to say, You're wrong, and I just have to walk away from that.

[25 : 43] Acts 13, another example of brushing the dust off of our feet. There were some people of high standing who were incited to stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas.

They were proclaiming the gospel, and they expelled them from their region. So Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet and went on to a different city. This happens.

If people are stirred up to make fun of you and to cause you psychological or physical trauma or harm, you don't have to stay in those relationships.

You don't. Acts chapter 18. Paul has devoted himself exclusively to preaching in a city, testifying that Jesus is the Messiah, and the Jews in particular began to oppose Paul and became abusive.

So Paul shook the dust off of his clothes in protest and said, Your blood be on your own heads. I'm innocent of it. From now on, I will go on to the Gentiles.

[26 : 45] Paul, in other words, saying, I'm not going to bother speaking to you all anymore. I'm going to go talk to people who will actually listen. Now, listen to me. Sometimes that sounds like the easy road to take, but it can lead to hurt and to heartache, so consider it carefully.

But please don't take on the responsibility of changing everybody's mind. It's not. It doesn't have to be your job. And I think we all have a thing to think through here.

Like, look, it is not the job of every black or brown person to convince the world of racism. Like, us white people got to talk to other white people about these things.

We can't make it just all of the black people's jobs. You hear me? It's not the job of every LGBTQ person to convince every straight person that homophobia and that kind of oppression and marginalization is wrong.

Sometimes us straight folks got to talk to the other straight folks to get them to listen and to learn. So we can't all just abandon ship. Some of us have to take on the hard work. But if you're the one being marginalized, if you're the one being oppressed, if you're the one who has been pushed down and told to shut up and go away, you don't have to keep going back to your abuser.

[27 : 59] Don't. Some of us, we need to resist from within. Some of us, we need to be prophets to our own crowd. And some of us, we need to just shake the dust off of our feet and walk away.

Another possible role is that of patient ferment. And I get this phrase from a wonderful book which explains how the first centuries of the church grew from a tiny little movement to spreading throughout the entire ancient world.

And it's the idea of patient ferment. That there are those who are sitting quietly, patiently being faithful to what God has called them to do, the hope that God will use that like a mustard seed to spread goodness into the world.

This is hard work, friends. Think of the prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and Obadiah, and all of those who were called to their people, called to proclaim the truth to their people.

And Jeremiah compared it to like eating bitter food. It gave him a stomach ache. Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 6, is told to go and proclaim. God says, who will I send?

[29 : 08] And Isaiah says, I will go send me. And God says, you will speak to a people who will not listen to you. But then we read, you know, 60 more chapters of the book of Isaiah, of Isaiah's ministry of patiently explaining God to his people.

That's what some of us are called to do. To be a non-anxious presence. To be differentiated enough from those who disagree with us. Just keep on proclaiming, God is good.

God intends good things for the world. Racism is wrong. Homophobia is wrong. Nationalism is wrong. Violence is wrong. And even if you won't listen to me, I'm going to keep on saying that.

That's what some of us are called to do as well. Now remember, not all of us can do all of that. Not all of us are called to do all of that at the same time. And sometimes our roles and our calls will change depending on where we are in life and how healed or not we are.

Don't feel like you have to do it all. It's not your job. I think of the story of the rich young ruler. There's a rich young ruler, wealthy man, who goes to Jesus and says, what do I have to do to be part of the coming age?

[30 : 28] Jesus says, like, well, looks like you are a slave to your wealth. Maybe if you sold it all and gave it away, you might be able to be part of the coming age. And the rich young man walks away sad because of the heavy ass that Jesus has given him.

Church tradition holds that this rich young man was a gentleman by the name of John Mark. And there are a couple things that hint at that idea.

In the book of Mark, it says that Jesus looked at the rich young man and loved him, which is not something a lot of people would know unless you were the one being looked at.

And there's another story in the book of Mark where Jesus is being arrested. And there's someone there in the garden with Jesus who runs away, gets his fancy cloak snagged on a bush, leaves it behind, and so has to run away naked.

Again, not a lot of people would know that unless you were the person that this happened to. We're told that the upper room where Jesus had the last supper with his disciples, we're eventually told in the book of Acts that that upper room was owned by John Mark.

[31 : 47] And church tradition tells us that Peter, when he was coming to the end of his life, wanted to get down his testimony of what it was like to be taught by Jesus.

And so gathered a man named John Mark and told his story. And then Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark. And I think about the fact that you have this rich young man who meets Jesus, walks away from Jesus, but eventually becomes the author of the Gospel of Mark, which two other Gospels use as their primary source to write their Gospels.

I think about that story and the implications it has in terms of what kind of patience do we need to have with the people who frustrate us, the rich young rulers in our lives, where we tell them the truth, man, if you could just let this go, you could be part of what Jesus is up to, and they at first refuse.

We think about those who, like John Mark, only would follow Jesus at a distance, who wouldn't really embrace everything that Jesus had to say, but I'll let you use my upper room for your, you know, your last supper.

I'll follow you from a distance in the garden, but then run away at the first sign of trouble. This was Paul's problem with John Mark in the book of Acts, where Paul and Barnabas and John Mark go on a missionary journey, but John Mark gets scared, goes home for a little while.

[33 : 10] Paul decides to go on a second journey. John Mark wants to come with. Paul says, no, not you. You ran away the first time. And so Barnabas takes John Mark aside and patiently mentors him until later at the end of Paul's life, he writes in one of his letters, send John Mark to me, for he is deeply helpful to me.

We all have John Marks in our lives. People where, sometimes like Paul, we've just got to walk away from them. They're too deeply frustrated. They're too hard to deal with. And some of us are called to be Barnabas and take those John Marks and mentor them and patiently help them see what Jesus is all about.

And each of us will have different people. We have different roles. We can't be all things to all people. But as we want to move forward as a church, we have to keep bothering.

Why bother? Remember, last week I said because I think it's true. This week I'm going to say because I think it's worth it. Because I still believe that the gospel of Jesus, the good news that God is present and is here and is working for good, is worth proclaiming.

And even if some absolute wackos want to take that message and twist it to their own racist and nationalistic ends and violently try to throw an insurrection, that doesn't change the fact that I still think Jesus is worth it.

[34 : 37] I am not going to give other people permission to ruin Jesus for me. That's why I bother. Friends, I think the good news of the gospel includes this.

There is more Jesus in the world today than there was back when Jesus walked the earth. Because Jesus said when he left, he would send the Spirit into his church.

And so that means that when we are bringing heaven to earth, we are embodying Jesus now. This is why I bother. And this is why we can't give up.

And so if there are people that you have to walk away from, if there are people that you are going to patiently mentor, if there are places where you've got to disobey the civil authority so that you can do some good, if you're going to resist from within or shake the dust off of your feet, friends, I hope you know it's worth bothering.

Would you pray with me? Gracious and almighty God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer, would you shape us and form us into people who would keep bothering with your gospel, who would keep believing that knowing you can change the world for the better, that you are in the business of bringing healing to brokenness, to bringing restoration to sickness, to bringing peace to violence, to bringing hope to darkness, to bringing light to despair, God.

[36 : 20] Would you show us how? We need your help. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.