Sermon 11/8/26 - The Ven. Robert L. Bibens - Trinity Church, Tulsa

The Gospel of Matthew says to us, "Keep awake". Translation: pay attention to what's going on around you! Sitting in the midst of all that's going on in our community, and in the world, and saying "I just didn't know", isn't enough. People are hungry, people are sick, people are sleeping outside, people are feeling all alone in the world, and yes, some people are dying.

I've told this story before, but it's too good not to be shared again. Back when I was in Oklahoma City, the church that Susan and I attended started a new program in conjunction with the downtown Cathedral. This program called the Guild of St. George would attempt to feed the homeless, as well as providing food and services to the working poor. Our church would provide volunteers and raise substantial funds to support this program, as our part in the mission. Some in the congregation were highly supportive, while some were a bit hesitant, as their exposure to the poor and homeless was a bit more limited. One of the older women became extremely vocal with her objections to the program, and told our organist/choirmaster that she sat in her front window every morning, drinking her coffee, and she'd never seen a homeless or poor person, so she had definitive doubts about whether this new ministry was absolutely necessary. My colleague told me, that what made this declaration particularly sad, but also a little funny, was that this woman lived on one of the richest streets in Oklahoma City, so most of the poor wandered elsewhere in the community…but she also had an eight foot high brick wall all the way around her property, keeping her from seeing ANYTHING that might occur outside of her courtyard. The organist said to me, "She could have a neighbor devoured by wolves out by her curb, and she wouldn't know for days!"

So, Matthew says to us "Keep awake"...pay attention…look beyond your own nose, and your own experience, so you might notice the situations of others all around you. Saying, "I just didn't know" simply isn't sufficient. We are called beyond <u>our</u> foolish ways and desires, to recognize and minister to a hurting world, which may not sometimes feel like our own.

The prophet, Amos, gives us a warning about our sometimes lame priorities, when he tells us that God will "let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." You might recall that Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. co-opted this passage of scripture, during the civil rights movement, and even wove these words into his "I have a dream" speech. Both of these servant ministers, Amos and MLK, were reminding us that God doesn't care about many

of the things that preoccupy our minds. Money, position, power, influence, and possessions aren't important to God, and shouldn't dwell so heavily in our thoughts and actions. Goodness and kindness, justice and honesty, mercy and caring…these are the hallmarks that are supposed to rule our lives.

I had the privilege of spending last Sunday at St. Paul's in Holdenville. It was fun to preach and teach in their midst. Some of you might have been underwhelmed at their church building, or the meager feast that they shared afterward. But, I was proud to be there, and I'll tell you why. Just 18 months ago, St. Paul's was down to 3 people on a Sunday morning. This included the priest and volunteer parish musician, by the way. Apparently, they looked at each other one Sunday morning, and asked one of the same questions that Trinity did over the last couple of years…what could we be doing differently, than we are right now? They decided that what they had in manpower, resources and physical plant needed to be shared with their community. Now, Holdenville, like lots of smaller towns in Oklahoma has seen better days. About half of the houses are either falling down, or are in need of significant repair. Many businesses have been shuttered, and when kids leave Holdenville for college, or a job, they seldom return. It was learned that over 60% of the people in town, didn't have health insurance, so very few were going to the doctor, the dentist or the pharmacy, unless it was absolutely necessary. Those 3 remaining parishioners reached out to some health professionals, some local businesses like Wal-Mart, and begged to use the high school gym, and a local health fair was born. 50 people, on a Saturday, got free check-ups of all kinds, vaccinations and medicine for the first time, in a long time. This year, that number jumped to 100 folks, and included haircuts and backpacks for the kids returning to school in August. It should be added that some of the visitors to the health fair are starting to come from other towns, too. St. Paul's, because of their servants' hearts are suddenly up to 18 parishioners, and the fastest growing church in our Diocese! The question was raised at last Sunday's luncheon, what should we do to keep growing? A very wise parishioner mentioned that "growth" needn't be limited to numbers sitting in the pews, or to the church's bank balance…maybe spiritual growth, inner growth, growth in awareness…perhaps those were the places they should be looking to spread their wings…and the parish rolls and budget might follow along later. So intelligent! Which is more relevant for St. Paul's, or Trinity for that matter? People in the pews and a blossoming budget, or spiritual growth, awareness of our community and neighbors, and opportunities to minister and share God's love? I think one automatically leads to the other.

The Beatles sang, "money can't buy me love"...and I think if money, numbers and influence were to become our priorities, eventually they would close the doors on this place, and make it an Episcopal museum. But, if we reach out, and establish our relevance and our priorities in the direction of making this world a better place, then I think the people and their pocketbooks will gladly follow. I don't propose this as a sneaky strategy to recruit others, but I think it is a known draw to the good people of Tulsa, who will always want to be where the good words and works are fostered.

We recited the words from Psalm 70, this morning, "You are my help and my deliverer." And we recognize in this statement, that God alone is the one that we need.

Every time I watch an election, I'm reminded that so many get caught in the trap of thinking that this politician, or that one, will take us to the promised land. But, deep down inside, we know in our heart of hearts, that the people we vote for CAN be wonderful and helpful, but they are NOT our salvation…they are imperfect and limited. How do we know this? Because we too are imperfect and limited. But, <u>God</u> is our true salvation…the only one on whom we should hang our ultimate hopes and trust. But, in the meantime, those leaders and we, with all of our brothers and sisters, can do our very best to make this city and this state, this country and this world, all that we might wish for them to be.

And, as Paul writes to the Thessalonians, we need to "encourage one another." So, by paying attention to what's happening around us, rethinking our priorities, growing in all of the ways that we can, and cheering on those that share and care and build and pray…all of these things are within our grasp. All of these things are what God calls us to do. Let's get busy.

Amen.