

**Rabbi Peter W. Stein**  
**Temple B'rith Kodesh-Third Presbyterian Church Exchange**  
**April 3, 2016/24 Adar II 5776**

Good morning! It is an honor and a joy to be here today, with Rev. Wilkinson and so many friends from our two congregations.

It is a great opportunity to speak at this particular time of year, on this first Sunday after Easter, the air still filled with the inspiration of that sacred season. And, in our Jewish cycle, we are in the weeks of preparation for Passover, anticipating the sacred opportunity to reflect on God's presence as the Source of both redemption and revelation.

But, most of all, it is very special to be able to speak at this vantage point because today is, of course, the opening day for Major League Baseball! If ever there was a day filled with optimism and unlimited potential, it is today! The grass has been cut, the uniforms are clean, and not even one single team has a losing record! Everyone is, today, on their way to the World Series!

Of course, we all know that this will change in very short order. Without being too philosophical, over the next few weeks, perspective for some will change from "We're the best" to "We'll do our best!" We all make that transformation at some point...

As I have the opportunity to speak with you today, I am mindful of the advice given by my homiletics professors...every sermon should have a beginning, a middle, and an end...and hopefully they're not too far apart. And, also, that giving sermons is like drilling for oil: and if you haven't struck oil after 20 minutes, stop boring!

When Rev. Wilkinson and I met to envision how we would share this weekend, we talked about the opportunity for each of us to take up the sacred texts that were presented in each of our reading cycles. And so, yesterday, John had the opportunity to look at several chapters from Leviticus...I do apologize that we didn't plan this during the Genesis or Exodus time of year! And for today, John shared with me the readings from the Presbyterian lectionary. In particular, I was drawn to the section from the Gospel of John and the response from Psalm 118.

Psalm 118 verse 19 begins "Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the Lord."

For all of us, each on our own path, we envision a path to righteousness, a journey to a world that is filled with justice and peace. It is this idea that calls me to speak with you today.

The reading from John focuses on the post crucifixion corporeality of Jesus. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds.

This is a challenging idea for many in the Jewish community. The image, however, is powerful.

I reflect on these two sacred texts together. The gates of righteousness are open—the path to a better world is accessible to us. To go down that path, we need to see—to touch—to react—to the wounds of others.

It is, sadly, so easy to become indifferent to the needs around us.

Our two religious communities come together each year, relishing in the opportunity to worship and study and socialize together. It is a missed opportunity if we limit the exchange to these kinds of activities. My hope is that this exchange is part of a foundation, part of the building of a community that combats indifference and enables us to see—to touch—to react—to the wounds of others.

At the beginning of the John passage, we read that “it was evening...and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked [out of] fear.”<sup>1</sup>

How sad it would be to live in a world where our doors are locked out of fear, where fear paralyzes us and isolates us. My dream is of a world of open doors and ever greater cooperation and understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> John 20:19

We are not only entering the baseball season but we are already in election season. Where all 30 teams stand tall today, we have already endured a campaign that tears people down, a campaign that is spreading fear and hatred and even violence.

I pray that our exchange—that our greater Rochester religious community—can combat this tone. Let us use the relationships we build as a model for cooperation and respect. Let us demonstrate that we may sometimes have different perspectives, but that those differences are valued.

Our many different faith communities can come together and show that when one person is wounded, it matters to all of us...when one person is struggling and suffering, it matters to all of us. I don't want a political climate that labels one group or another as "the other" and blames "the other" as the root of our troubles. I want a political climate that brings us together to work for the common good, a climate that allows us to touch one another, that enables us to understand the needs of our fellow community members. I want a climate that places us all on the path to a better world, together.

In the psalm, after the plea to "open for me the gates of righteousness" there is an exaltation: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."<sup>2</sup> In the biblical context, this is a metaphor for ancient Israel moving from exile to life in the heart of Jerusalem.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:22

In today's world, it is an image with great power...the stone that was once rejected has become the cornerstone. We thrive when we build a better world by embracing and caring for those who struggle and those who are wounded. We move towards a better world when we reject a climate of rejection.

The cornerstone of a better world is a commitment to heal the wounded, not to prey on their struggles and their differences as a sign of weakness or immorality. We must demand this of our candidates, our officials, and ourselves.

There is tremendous power in coming together as we have this morning. The power and potential is that we can become a model of how much can be accomplished when we seek out understanding, when we celebrate diversity, and when we define a common goal. Let us explore, together, how we can stop the negative voices and how we can reach out to embrace those who have shown us their wounds.

May God guide us and bless us, to a better world. May we, together, open the gates of righteousness and enter them and offer thanks to the Lord.

Amen.