

**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Kristin Kaulbach Miles Transcript**

“A Scaffolding or a Swarm”

A question arises for us in light of this week’s events and today’s scriptures: as a community are we scaffolding or a swarm? “Scaffolding is what we erect around the places where people are vulnerable,” preaches the Rev. Kristin Kaulbach Miles, and yet we “see the swarm” welding authority and wickedness all around us.

Mother Kristin invites us to consider all that has happened this week –from the Elijah McClain homicide, to Hurricane Ida, to the Texas abortion ban– and then what needs to be built, removed, and cleaned.

The readings are Proverbs 22:1–2, 8–9, 22–23; Psalm 125; James 2:1–10, 14–17; and Mark 7:24–37.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of God who creates redeems and sustains us.

A question arises for us in light of this week's events, and the wisdom tradition from today's scriptures. As a society, as a community, are we scaffolding or a swarm? I was coming home from church Wednesday night in the deluge, and there were various sets of scaffolding that I took refuge under in making my way on the blocks between the church and the subway, and then the subway and home. The scaffolding gave me shelter of reprieve from the pelleting rain. Scaffolding is what we erect around the places where people are vulnerable in the process of whatever needs to be built, removed, restructured, or cleaned. After this week storms, we grieve for those who were unable to escape, whose basement level apartments filled with water under such speed and force. We know help is needed, and a congregant reached out to me about how to be part of building a scaffolding of support for those recovering. The other experience of community or society is the opposite of scaffolding. I went to the beach recently, and it was a calm, clear day, sunny, but as I was shaking out my blanket and setting up my chair, small black flies started biting me. They seemingly came from nowhere. There was no seagrass, there was no debris, out of nowhere, they just started swarming me.

When I went to try to find some bugs spray, I discovered that several people had resorted to putting their beach chairs in the parking lot to get away from the swarm, seeking refuge. The biblical wisdom tradition of ethical living addresses the relentless tendency of human nature to act out of insecurity and need to reinforce our own status by discriminating against others such that swarming results. We know from history both long past and recent, domestic and international, that self-righteousness and scornful judgment around perceived difference can be contagious. A block of people can quickly swarm toward an individual or individuals who may have marked as a target for their hostility. The wisdom tradition evidenced in our scriptures today, in our Proverbs, in the Psalm, in the Letter of James, in the Gospel of Mark, invites us to focus on three I's that can navigate us more towards building scaffolding and away from harmful swarm. These three I's are insight, influence, and integrity. Insight, Proverb says that it is to our peril when we deny the common humanity that binds us.

The call in our Proverb today to be generous literally means to give good eye, whereas stingy is of bad eye. We can be of good eye, have insight by honestly seeing our actions and their effects. We can observe how the vulnerability of others, their very poverty is actually used as an opportunity to take even more from them at the metaphorical city gate, the places of public businesses and courts. The letter from James identifies issues relevant for today, such as the withholding of daily wages, due laborers who have little or no recourse. The double mindedness is the problem. We know the right, the fair, the kind way, but then we do otherwise. In her book, *Reading Jesus*, professor and author Mary Gordon writes, "Certainly, the human task of resisting a powerful impulse should be understood as an important part of moral life." We have the capacity when we use this insight. The human task of resisting a powerful impulse should be understood as an important part of the moral life. That's the insight, the influence. Psalm 125 lifts up the reality that people are influenced by one another, such that, as we read in the Psalm, the wicked wield authority in the land.

Reinhold Niebuhr and his volume, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* names that moral people are far more inclined to do immoral things like indulging in cruelty in the name of their society or nation. The wisdom literature gives us the choice. Are we going to be a community, a society of scaffolding to protect the vulnerable and rebuild, or do we go to swarm? The swarms at work, and racism resulting in this week's indictments and then 2019 deaths of Elijah McClain. The swarm against immigrants and refugees, the swarm of hostility towards others, self-expression and gender and relationships. We see the swarm that undergirds this week's abortion ban in Texas. The attempt to take complex, intimate decisions away from those whose very bodies are involved while encouraging vigilante voyeurism and punishment from any neighbor or stranger who is motivated to pursue it. I have worked as a chaplain in the labor and delivery units of multiple hospitals. Situations arise that none of us would choose to be in, and most of us can't imagine. On top of the strain and heartbreak of very hard decisions, now women and their loved ones and any supporting professionals who companion and attend to them as they go forward with an abortion are to be objectified and prosecuted under this upheld state law.

As has always been true with any violation or trespass on human and civil rights, we are all in eventual danger when we encourage and permit citizens to harass other citizens whose actions or choices displease them. But, we will build scaffolding. We will use our influence. That's what James is doing in his letter. It was written to strengthen the faith and life and traditions of Jews living outside their homeland. It holds accountability that the ultimate standard that Jesus came to model is spelled out in the book of Leviticus, to love your neighbor as yourself. We are each call to be influencers and championing this ethic. This takes us to integrity. We have insight and influence and integrity. Integrity that what we say matches what we do, that our life conforms to our faith. In James, James defines religion at the start of his letter as simply this, to care for orphans and widows, namely those most neglected, vulnerable, and disposable, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. That is what we are here to do. We do this amidst the pressures that push in and form us, and always we learn from Jesus. The concept of scaffolding, and I know we have educators in the church today, is used in teaching. Scaffolding refers to a method in which teachers offer a particular support to students as they learn and develop a new concept or skill. The Syrophenician woman offered such scaffolding to Jesus. Jesus's vision, his mission, his skill of ministry expanded through his interaction with her. He became aware of the bias he had simply inherited and resulting discrepancy, and how he was treating people, a favoritism that wounded and marginalized.

This is one of the most important events in scripture. Jesus grows with the new information and experience. His mindset changes. He moves from oversight to insight, as each of us have to do across our life. He moves from being part of what had been a swarm to becoming a scaffolding builder. The

motif of the opened ear is used in Jewish texts as a symbol for revelation. Jesus's ears are opened by this interaction with the Syrophenician woman right before he opens the ears of the deaf man. The gospel reinforces the wisdom teaching that a community with love of our neighbor as its central ethic brings us to places we could never get on our own. We need to advocate for one another. The young girl is freed of demon possession because her mother pleads on her behalf. The deaf man is brought to Jesus by a community of people who want him to have a better life. We are each called to engage. There is an antidote about a couple of brothers who are fighting over the last pancake at the breakfast table. A mother overhears this argument, this ruckus, and comes to the table. "Now boys," she says, "What would Jesus do? Jesus would give that last pancake to his brother." One of the brothers acknowledges his mother. Then he turns to his brother and says, "You'll be Jesus." That's what church is about. We look around together, we make scaffolding as we attend to what needs to be built, removed, cleansed. We use our insight, our influence, and our integrity. Let's be Jesus.

Amen.