

ONE THING WORSE THAN THIS

“We must accept in our public life what we know is true in our private life – that nothing is achieved without effort and sacrifice.” So read the concluding words of *The Strategy for Peace* by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, whose own effort and sacrifice were brought to dramatic termination here in our own city, Friday afternoon. Mrs. Holmes and I were waiting at the Trade Mart luncheon when word of the President’s assassination fell upon the city, the nation and the world.

Since that time, I’ve tried to be about my business: wrestling with the question of how we, the church, a historic community, can really be the church in the midst of this most grievous historical event? The weight of wrestling with this question was not lessened when a friend from the National Council of Churches called long distance Friday evening to say: “Bill, a host of us are praying that Dallas’ clergy will have something more to say about this event than pious platitudes and sentimentalities.”

I have several alternatives before me now as I begin this sermon. I could eulogize John Kennedy. This would not be hard for me to do. Or, I could deliver myself of pent up bitterness toward Lee Harvey Oswald, his alleged assassin. This would not be hard for me to do. But after brooding prayerfully the last forty-eight hours about this sermon, offered in the name of God, I am very clear this morning that our mission in this service is neither one of eulogy nor of catharsis.

My text is taken from the Gospel of St. Matthew which tells the familiar story of Pontius Pilate delivering a carpenter from Nazareth into the hands of first century extremists, and then washing his own hands in a bowl of water, and declaring boldly to the crowd: “I take no responsibility for the death of this man.”

The subject of this sermon is: “One Thing Worse Than This.” President John Kennedy was killed two days ago in Dallas, and the *one thing worse than this* is that the citizens of Dallas should declare unto the world: “We take no responsibility for the death of this man.” Yet, that already seems to be the slogan of our city and some of its officials: “Dallas is a friendly city – this was the work of one madman and extremist.” “Our hearts are saddened – but our hands are clean.” How neat and simple this solution. How desperately we wish that it were true.

I am well aware this morning that the man charged with the assassination of our President is an admitted, left-wing Marxist. But any extremism – whether it wears

the hat of left-wing or right-wing – issues in the same by-products. It announces death and condemnation to all who hold a different point of view. And here is the hardest thing to say: There is no city in the United States which in recent months and years has been more acquiescent toward its extremists than Dallas, Texas. We, the majority of citizens, have gone quietly about our work and leisure, forfeiting the city's image to the hate mongers and reactionaries in our midst. The spirit of assassination has been with us for some time – not manifest in bullets, but in spitting mouths and political invectives.

Dallas is the city:

- Where, three years ago, Vice President and Mrs. Johnson were spat upon and cursed by a seething crowd in the lobby of one of our hotels.
- Where, last month, hundreds of our citizens continually interrupted an address by United Nations, Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, with intentional coughs, heckling, cat-calls and Halloween noisemakers. Upon leaving the Auditorium, Mr. Stevenson was struck with a sign and spat upon.
- Where, many leaders and officials expressed anxiety and “fear of incident” when first learning of the President and Mrs. Kennedy’s intention to be our guests.
- Where, the day of the President and First Lady’s arrival, the Dallas Morning News ran a full page ad with the mocking caption: “Welcome Mr. Kennedy.” The ad contained a number of questions which were themselves accusations of President Kennedy, implying his cooperation with the U.S. Communist Party, his “bloodily extermination” of Anti Communist Allies, and his scrapping the “Monroe Doctrine in favor of the ‘Spirit of Moscow.’”
- Where, 4th grade children in a north Dallas public school, clapped and cheered when told by their teacher of the assassination of the President last Friday afternoon.

In the name of God, what kind of city have we become?

Dallas has been my home now for the last twelve years. I hope it will be my home for many years to come. It is a city that I love and hold in high regard. We have many graces and human decencies of which I am extremely proud. But we cannot,

month after month, year after year, sow seeds of intolerance and hate, and then, upon learning of the President's visit, just throw a switch and hope all rancor will disappear.

The vocal, organized and unorganized extremists have captured us – while we were sleeping in the night. And there is no way in all creation to avoid our mutual guilt. By our timidity, we have encouraged the aggressor; by our paralysis we have given safe conduct to reactionaries; by our confusion we have promoted the clarity of evil; by our small prejudices and little hates we have prepared the way for monstrous and demonic acts that have betrayed us all. We have become a garbled people, mistaking patriotic cries for patriotism, boisterous boasts for courage, and superficial piety for faith. In this week of blood-stained history and death, we are under an imperative to cry: “Oh Lord, have mercy on us all.”

Yet still there hang the questions: “What are we to be?” “What are we to do?” By the grace of God, this much is clear. We are called to be a city where political debate continues. Different points of view must be expressed. Liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, must go on exchanging partisan convictions. The two party system is intrinsic to our way of life, and through the years the correctives, balances, and checks of these two parties, held in tension, have given depth and magnitude to our destiny as a nation and a people. But the context of that debate in Dallas – as all across our land – must be the context of mutual forbearance and good will. We must be as jealous of another person's right to think and live as we are jealous for that right ourselves. It is not too late to learn that we can agree to disagree in love – and still hold partisan persuasions.

But where do we begin? We have our children. They were not born hating the President of the United States – though they soon learn to imitate their parents. It is not only important that we nurture them in political ideas, but in the even more important fundamentals of understanding and respect for those who hold a different point of view.

We have our neighborhoods. When the extremist across the street or down the block starts spewing his epithets and hate, he must soon discover that he has a contest on his hands as we confront him with sanity and love.

We have our precincts, where live and vital issues are discussed. It is time both liberals and conservatives took responsibility for the reactionaries and extremists in their own parties.

“Can this be done?” asked John Kennedy. “Can we meet this test of survival and still maintain our tradition of individual liberties and dissent? I think we can ... So let the debate go on – and may the best ideas prevail.”

John Kennedy is dead – killed two days ago in our own city. If Dallas rises from this monstrous moment in her history, a new city where different political opinions and the people who hold them are respected, then John Kennedy will not have died in vain.

But that remains to be seen. Until then, the *one thing worse than this* assassination in our midst, is that we, the citizens of Dallas, should wash our hands and say, “We take no responsibility for this man’s death.”