

SERMON FOR EASTER 3, APRIL 19, 2026:

Good morning saints, because we are all saints in God's eyes.

My name is Paul Manfredi. I am an active member of St. John's in New Milford; as well as Braver Angels and a student in "Education of Ministry" or EFM. Also, I am an approved ECCT officiant, preacher and member of the Standing Committee.

"While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

How often might we have interacted with someone and not realize the impact they have on us or we on them; until much later. How often have we crossed the street to avoid someone who we don't agree with or they don't look right? We should be like Cleopas, allowing anyone to join us on our journey.

All of life is a choice. Every day we choose between tea and coffee, we choose whether to get up or stay in bed, we choose whether to read the newspaper, television or social media. In our democratic country we choose our representatives in government. We constantly make choices. We should be thankful that we have this incredible freedom of choice. Braver Angels has made me aware of the choices I make and understand how they may impact others.

It is easy to go onto autopilot in church? The readings. The archaic words. The rituals. The priest doing his or her thing up at the altar. It is easy to let everything pass by without thought. Myself included, too. Familiarity can breed sterility. We become so used to our expectations of church that it becomes routine, or tedious, or worse, becomes boring, or even worse than that, becomes irrelevant and we stop going to church.

Jesus had freedom of choice. He chose to go into the desert. He chose to accept his ministry and death. Freedom is something we all deal with on a daily basis. I think especially here in the US, we are so surrounded by talk of 'liberty' and 'rights' that we can take freedom for granted and miss just how deeply it shapes not just our politics, but our relationships and even our faith. We tell our children that they are free to be anything they want.

We hold independence and agency up as guiding ideals for our lives. Freedom is very present in our everyday lives. We value it. We fight for it—cling to it. We just do not often step back and ask ourselves what freedom actually means. Or does every enjoy the same freedoms as we do.

Sometimes, we take freedom for granted and sometimes rather than face hard choices we allow others to make choices for us. And if we do, we start to go down the path of partisan politics and political polarization. And we may lose friends and stop talking to each other. As a community we need each other to make things happen. And, do we think about how our choices impacts others?

Remember in his time, Jesus was both political and non-violent revolutionary. Jesus challenged the status quo by advocating for radical ideas of love, compassion, and equality that challenged established religious and social norms of his time. He preached a message of inclusivity, reaching out to the marginalized and oppressed, regardless of social status or background. His teachings emphasized forgiveness, turning the other cheek, and caring for the poor and downtrodden. Jesus confronted hypocrisy and criticized the oppressive systems of his time. His actions and words sparked a movement that transcended societal boundaries and continues to inspire change today.

In our sixth article of the baptismal covenant, we are asked “*Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*” This is not an easy task; we are asked to respect every human being? Even those we disagree with, do not understand their actions or motivations and their actions do not appear in line with our faith, values or principals. Our faith gives us lots of guidelines: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31) and “Make every effort to live in peace with all men” (Hebrews 12:14) to “Be reconciled to your brother” (Mathew 5:23-24). “Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy (Zechariah 7:9-10) And living into these guidelines is hard and does require us to live into our faith. I have found Braver Angels methods has given me a deeper understanding and different language skills to react to those I do not understand or disagree with. I find myself more willing to quiet my thoughts, stop and listen to others without interrupting. I realize what you and I say matters and how we say it is important. As a person, I am not always successful and sometimes slip back into old habits.

When time happens, I think of one of my favorite bible quotes “Love your enemies.” In this case love means respect others giving them an opportunity to express themselves. Even if we disagree with them. At no time, did Jesus say blindly follow someone.

*If you think of others as being made in the image of God, does this have an impact on how you deal with them? And do these teachings get past the church parking lot?*

Braver Angels has given me a way to express my faith in public. I know it is difficult in today’s environments not to be swept up with the partisan polarization. In life there are obstacles, difficulties and struggles constantly fighting for our attention and masking the voice of God and his path.

I have found Braver Angels has given me some tools to focus on my faith and values and be able to express them in a non-stereotypical or dismissive manner.

Please join me after service for a conversation about Braver angels and how it has enabled me to live into my Christian faith more fully.

Amen