

Feeding and Tending; More than Words

Easter 3C

Longmeadow, MA

April 22, 2007

Following the shootings at Virginia Tech this week, this is a difficult Sunday to be a pastor. It is a strange Sunday to be in a pulpit. I know that I'm not the only one who feels that way, because on Tuesday I was at a clergy meeting where 7 or 8 of us discussed what we might say, what we wouldn't say, or couldn't say and shouldn't say. Our conversation went almost immediately to scripture. What passage should we read and preach on? Should we stick with the lectionary the pre-selected cycle of texts (as I have chosen to do) or should we pick something more directly to the point of what we are thinking and feeling? Some scriptures that have come up on conversations with pastors include:

Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.

Jeremiah 31:15¹

Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place, for all who live by the sword will perish by the sword."

Matthew 26: 51-52

No in all of these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord

Romans 8: 37-39

¹ See "Our Young People Need Us" as found at <http://www.macucc.org/president/youngpeople.htm>

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; out do one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Romans 12: 9-18

Then there are the lectionary passages for today which include:

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, his favor for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Psalms 30: 4-5, 11-12

And the passage from John's gospel, which we've just heard, which happens to be my favorite of the resurrection appearance passages.

For me it is tremendously powerful to hear these ancient words speak to the very heart of our full range of emotions this week. I admit that I take some comfort in knowing that for thousands of years people have been asking, "Where is God in all of this?" And "How am I called to respond?" I think our scriptures offer, what is to me, the miraculous ability to speak to the issues of the day, any and everyday.

I certainly don't claim to have all the answers to the questions that are in our hearts. But I do lay claim to certain truths that have made it possible for me to get through this week.

1) God is with us. God was and is with the students at Virginia Tech, with their parents, their professors, the administrators, and with all whose lives are forever changed by this incident, God weeps with those who are weeping.

2) God did not will this to happen. God's heart was breaking on that Monday afternoon, as once again one of God's beloved creation used violence as a response to pain, frustration and perhaps isolation.

3) As a people who claim God's incarnation into the person of Jesus, we know God knows intimately the pain and loss particular to the death of innocents. God was not, and is not distant at times like these.

4) That death is not the end. Not for those students, not for our loved ones, not for us. Nothing, not even death according to Paul, can separate us from the love of God.

5) Because of our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because we know new life in Christ, in time God will turn our mourning into dancing, and that indeed while weeping may linger for the night, joy comes with the morning.

None of these truths explains everything, or perhaps answers all the questions that are on our hearts and in our minds, but they are for me, and I hope for you, enough to get us through.

One of the strange things about a week such as this, is that even as there is pain and sorrow and heartache, there is also so much to celebrate and rejoice in. I'm so thankful that we had two baptisms scheduled for today. We are, after all, people of The Good News. These two babies, like angel messengers from God, with their coos and cries, these babies speak of hope. They call out, "don't give up on the world just yet" God is still doing amazing and miraculous things. We have witnessed and participated in the welcoming of two strangers into our midst.

We've heard the promises of their parents and made promises ourselves. At its very core, baptism is about blessings, about honoring God's wondrous works, about naming and claiming the loving kiss which God has placed upon our foreheads, about publicly saying, "Yes" to God's presence with us from the beginning and acknowledging the goodness of God's creation. Every time I witness or participate in a baptism I am reminded of the idea that there is something profoundly subversive about this sacrament. Baptism dares to embody the belief that hope will have the last word and this world can be different, and that by coming together as the body of Christ we can impact and influence on another and the world around us.

Today we hear the risen Christ speak to us from across the ages, asking "Do you love me." Jesus said, then feed my lambs.

A second time we hear "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?" "Yes lord, you know that I love you" Tend my sheep.

A third time, "Simon Son of John, do you love me?" Feed my sheep.

As Christians we, like Peter, have been known to deny Christ from time to time, we've all had our moments where we've denied our identities as disciples, but Christ comes back to us again and again and again, with a chance to start over. Simon son of John, is what Peter was called, before he followed Jesus, before Jesus named him "the rock." Peter denied that identity and Jesus here offers him a chance to reclaim it.

Jesus asks for no apology, Jesus asks for no explanation of Peter's theology, Jesus isn't interested in Peter's understanding of scriptural interpretation, or his thoughts on the efficacy of prayer, or communion, or baptism. Do you love me. Yes? Then feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Show me. Don't tell me, show me. If you love me, take care of those who cannot care for themselves, gather the one's who've been scattered, calm their fears, feed them—both actual food but also meet their need, whatever it may be. *Each of us* has been given something that can be used toward the tending and feeding. Each of us has been given *something* that can be used toward the tending and feeding. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Yes Lord, you know that I love you. Feed my lambs, tend and feed my sheep. Our first

instinct in times of difficulty might be to recoil, to draw back, to turn inward. And yet Christ compels us to go forth, to reach out, and to serve. For it is only in relying on God's grace, only in recognizing each day as a gift, only in seeking connection to and through God, can we find the security we so desperately desire.

Today I close with a prayer from United Church of Christ's General Minister and President, John Thomas:

"Take us, O God, to places we are reluctant to go, to the wounded places, the shattered places, the terrified places. There may we feed your lambs with compassion, tend your sheep with healing, feed your flock with hope. There, with Peter, may we move from denial to discipleship, and thus find strength in the midst of this week's sorrow and rage, to sing again an Easter song." ²

² See "A Litany for the Third Sunday of Easter in Response to the Violence at Virginia Tech" found at <http://news.ucc.org>