

11.8.20 :32P23 Love Near and Far

- Some years ago the ELCA Churchwide Youth Gathering was held in Dallas Texas
 - Almost 50,000 young people and their adult leaders crowded the city to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, and for their faith to be deepened by its proclamation in the gathering
 - And of those thousands, several hundred came together in a meeting room one afternoon to talk about a social issue that was burning hot at the moment – capital punishment
 - After a brief presentation of biblical interpretation and Lutheran ethics, we were all mixed up and divided into small groups of ten to discuss the death penalty – and not surprisingly, both youth and adults represented the whole range of opinions from pro to con
 - But first, in our small groups we introduced ourselves, and where we came from.
 - I was the only person from Pennsylvania, and I thought that it was odd that one young teenager took a particular interest in me because I was from Pennsylvania
 - So when the group's time for conversation was over, she latched on to me
 - Where exactly was I from in Pennsylvania?
 - Had I ever heard of a small town on the Delaware River, which was about a little more than an hour away from where we were living at the time in Summit Hill?
 - AND THEN SHE DROPPED THE BOMB, AND MY JAW DROPPED
 - Had I heard of the case of the teenager who had recently savagely killed his parents? Had I heard? ...because that was her cousin, her aunt, and her uncle, and then she began to cry.
 - She needed to talk, she needed to cry, and she needed someone from Pennsylvania to listen to her
 - She hated what her cousin had done by murdering her aunt and uncle
 - But she also remembered the times when she and her cousin of about the same age had visited,

and played together, and she still loved him and didn't want him to die

- I tell you this story not to try to settle the question of capital punishment
- I tell you this story to remind each one of us, that talking about big justice issues like this, is much different when you are looking in the face of sobbing person who has been torn apart by it all
 - Think of the pressing issues of this day
 - We need to listen to the stories of Black people to hear that Black Lives Matter
 - We need to hear from police officers that sometimes they are senselessly ambushed and murdered
 - We need to hear from LGBT+ that their lives matter
 - We need to hear that poverty is not solved simply
 - We need to hear that like our ancestors, many people have good reasons to flee to the borders of our country
 - We need to hear the stories of people who cannot afford health care
 - We need to hear, despite loud attempts to downplay or deny it, that the coronavirus is real, it kills too many people, and makes too many more folks very sick
- Justice on the big scale, is far more real and painful when it comes down to the personal level
- Today's first reading, a lesson from the prophet Amos is about two things
 - First, it's about the hypocrisy of worship in the time of Amos, that gave praise and offerings to God, but which secondly, at the same time, didn't care about the suffering of people on either the personal level or the big scale
- So what is just? What is justice?
 - Some years ago, a deep-thinking Christian with a great deal of experience working with individual people who had torn apart by injustice said, "JUSTICE IS LOVE AT A DISTANCE!" [Joseph Sittler]
 - Justice is love at a distance.
 - That means that we work with people who we see, and from those encounters that we root in biblical teaching and faith-filled listening and conversation, we only then

broaden that experience to ground justice in a more expansive understanding of God's love and mercy for us and others

- If you think about it, that's exactly what God has done!
 - God reached out to people like Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, and Amos and Isaiah, to have a close, covenantal and prophetic-inspired relationship with them
 - And then from that relationship, God did even more – God became flesh – in Jesus he reached out to the sick and the lost, to even the foreigners and the shunned, and to even eat with tax collectors and sinners
 - Instead of a broad sense of justice developed from above to punish and condemn sinners, God in flesh in Jesus Christ came down, looked sinners in the eye, forgave their sins, and loved them... and continues to love us
 - And from those close and personal encounters, the Good News is that God's heavenly justice now sets sinners free from bondage to sin, and God calls forgiven sinners to share that same merciful, forgiving and restoring love here in this world
- So let our worship be filled with praise! Let us celebrate the festivals! Let us give offerings! But hearing the warning from the prophet Amos, let our worship also inspire us to connect with people both in our church and out in the world who are hurting, and then listen to their stories, and then in response, share biblical, merciful, forgiving, and restorative love.
- Remembering God-inspired love on a personal level, expands beyond itself to become justice for others even beyond our reach and experience, so that in the words of Amos: "...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. [5:18]"