

"I Break for Jesus" (17July16)

Psalms 13;

Colossians 1:15-28;

Genesis 18:1-10a;

John 10:11-18

It seems obvious we can't have a vacation from church because our lives won't accept that pause.

A couple examples: I was in Hawaii, ready to play cards with family when news came about Orlando. And I was eating lunch when I heard of Philando Castille's death in my seminary neighborhood. I was starting my weekend with a movie on the couch with Acacia when my phone buzzed about Dallas, visiting my mom as the Fort McMurray fire blazed, and was going to the baseball game when learning about France this week.

We can hold onto only so many of those moments, but nevertheless our routine lives become marked by them. Even as you're adding a new Dallas tragedy to these layers, you may still hold the memory of where you were when President Kennedy was shot. I can picture in elementary school where as a 1st grader I knew something wasn't right when the Challenger space shuttle blew up. I recall the seminary classroom on 9\11 when the first tower had been hit and a professor suggested we might want to be in chapel worship that day.

She was right. We continue to need this. This is where we come for good news, for a change. This may be where we look for answers. We may expect to find something different, hope amid despair, find life amid death. We may seek community, since "Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot. Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name."

Okay, those were theme song lyrics to the old TV show "Cheers." I know that reference to a bar may not seem to fit the seriousness I was

mentioning, but scan the obituary pages these days and notice the memorial services at a bar, or at a botanical garden or park. We have to ask if church is just another place to commiserate, with beautiful distractions in music or moments of quiet. If so, is this any different than those other places that are made to bear grief and sorrow and the longing for sympathy in these days?

Though church functions well in those quote-unquote "standard" ways, we have the burden of admitting that, in worse moments, we can end up hypocritical and less engaged in fixing the world and sharing love than we followers of Jesus should be.

We also have the added theological conundrum when these terrible things happen. A loving God who merely weeps with us wouldn't seem to be very helpful. But a mighty God who causes catastrophe is left constrained in fear, not worthy of devotion or praise. President Obama's remarks this week were constructively hopeful, but he phrased recent misfortune in terms that "God has called [the dead officer] home." I disagree that God is the type to interrupt life with horrendous violence as a means to take us to heaven. But if that's not what God does, it leaves the question of where God is in these moments, or the still harder wondering if God even exists.

As we've said before, though: here we are. We may gather in church intent on continuing to figure this stuff out, on confronting the hard questions. More, in the face of tragedy and sorrow, we not only desire answers when we cry out "why," but also long for resolutions, for ways to resolve the problems and end the crying. We long not only for less pain, but to be people who can heal.

Yet today we remain hurting people. For this summer, there has been too much hard news, too much sad news and bad news,

besides all the personal struggles and sadnesses that wear us down as we bear them. In what's becoming more devastation than we and our world can handle, we just can't catch a break. It seems there's no vacation from all these problems.

That, again and centrally, is why we are here, why—in spite of travels and visitors and all that fills long summer days in often very good ways—why we find ourselves in church. We need a place to pause and collect ourselves. We need some beauty and music to fill our hearts and lungs, inspiring us. We need encouragement. We need the presence of each other, to sort through and talk about this stuff, or sometimes just for a hug or smiling face.

I'd contend, though, that church is not exactly a place of answers. If we yearn for "why" questions to get simple explanations like "because of God," our lives, our world, and certainly the mystery of faith are more complex than that. As hard as we may work, it's no easy fix. As powerful as the love and life of God is, even resurrection doesn't eliminate the sting of death we face.

Amid complexities we hold as we gather here, we don't claim total good in ourselves or condemn others as ultimately evil. We don't say Muslims are bad or police are against us or that all trucks are dangerous weapons. We refuse such categorical fears. Even amid the deepest darkness, we strive to find and name the light. We long for, but also expect and trust redemption, both consistently and impatiently.

This is the faithful and paradoxical language of the Psalm chosen for this service. It is among the Bible's vital reminders that faith isn't being happy all the time, not blind rationalizing that God has a bigger plan, or anything like that. The Psalm gives us language to complain, to lament, to cry out "How long?! How long must I bear pain and sorrow?" And yet it goes on to sing, "I

trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation." Even as we gather today with too much grief, wondering when and how it will all be over, still we practice singing, with joy, trusting love that endures.

Another of the complex distinctions in the heated mix this week is the skirmish about #BlackLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter or #AllLivesMatter. Held by boundless compassion, we know these can be both true and also silly to squabble about. A child who skinned her knee needs different care in that moment than another. Or, in Bishop Mary's example, the fire department treats all houses as worth their attention, but when a house is on fire, that one matters. Again, we can say that God loves everybody, but sometimes when it's miserable and you feel horrible and you wonder if everything is out to get you, you need to know that God loves *you*.

This fits the lectionary reading from Colossians assigned for today, which essentially says "All Lives Matter." But it isn't only meaning multiracial of black, brown, and white skin tones. It isn't limited for those killed on duty or those killed *by* those on duty. This stretches wider. Christ Jesus is making amends for all creation, reconciling "all things." This proclaims an enormous vision of God's work. Examining the expanse of this in terms of these days, it says that American Lives Matter and French Lives Matter, that Christian Lives Matter and Muslim Lives Matter, that Black Lives and Blue Lives Matter, that victims' lives matter while terrorist lives also matter, and cancer lives and homeless lives and poor lives and wealthy lives all matter. Old lives and young lives matter. Plus polar bear lives matter. Monarch butterfly lives matter. Democratic lives and Republican lives matter. Each and every one of these is worth announcing, for its own value. The huge scale of all these lives matter, and your small life still

matters to God. None of these are excluded, and they're also brought together in reconciliation, out from deadliness and hostility and competition to new life and peace in Christ Jesus. It's among the Bible's most stunning readings (though it's not perfect). It's an important promise for us to cling to in these hard days. The place of God's amazing work in Jesus isn't just inner spirits or after death but is spread through every complex intricacy and relationship of creation.

That points us to some surprises. We know that prejudice cannot suffice as the end expectation, that God's work continues and may pop up where we weren't looking. This is what's in the lectionary reading from Genesis: Sarah and Abraham receive strangers with hospitality, and then also receive unexpected good news and joy. We meet and receive God's presence in people and places we know to look, in bread and wine where Jesus declares he will be found. But God may also show up with strangers and outsiders and unfamiliar faces. Amid or underneath any of the desperate circumstances around us, then, we may keep searching to find revealed the surprising good news of God's work.

Life can't be defined by tragedies, then, because the tragedies begin to be redeemed in the ordinary moments, these summer days, the very places and relationships you find yourself when the shockwaves hit. God is deep in all those events and commonplaces.

In the Gospel chosen for this service, Jesus the Good Shepherd similarly says there are other sheep not of this fold. His caring presence is not restricted to those who gather for church or even for the human contingent of sheep. Imagine how shocking that would've been to those earliest Christians, surrounded by fearful persecutions.

In some parallel way, we keep coming back here for the assurance of this declaration, so critically needed. As we're surrounded by too much death, Jesus declares his life not stolen, but given. His sacrifice is not a loss of life, but a gift, a gain, a sharing. Different from but so connected to the disasters that have happened, in Jesus is the word that death does not triumph and enmity and hatred will not break our world apart because God will not give up at reconciliation. Unflinchingly, this Good Shepherd won't abandon you but will go through death to abide in care.

That promise enables us to find relief and encouragement, to be sustained and resilient, to overcome almost overwhelming hopelessness, to find confidence in community, to rejoice in beauty and delight in song. These aren't distractions or compensations amid the sorrows of life. Flowing out to these days when we seem to face unending sorrow and flowing out across this trembling world—flowing from this heart of God, who in the image of Jesus is revealed as a God of compassion, of care, of love, of life for you, and a God we all need at just such a time as this.

(SONG)

Listen to your children amid all of creation, from bacteria and Zika virus infected mosquitoes to Jupiter and distant galaxies. Amid days of summer, sustain crops that grow and lakes that offer refreshment and renewal. Hear the cries of endangered species and habitats. **Listen, Lord**

(SONG)

Listen to your children of every nation, to those who wail in grief in France this week, to immigrants and refugees who long for security and a new home, to those under conflict, including in South Sudan, Turkey, and Syria, to

those who fear globalization and distrust their neighbors. **Listen, Lord**

(SONG)

Listen to the pleas around us. Reconcile racial divides between us. Mend the gaps of income inequality. Bring new life for those in jails and prisons. Foster care and justice in our communities, both in the work of police departments and our elected officials. **Listen, Lord**

(SONG)

Listen to us. We ask on behalf of the needs of our congregations, for the sick including Joyce Anderson, Hollis Rudiger, Ken Johnson, Tom and Joan Matthew's son-in-law Jeff, and Julie Walsh's brother Jim.

We pray this week for members Pat Eddings and Avis Elson, Kathy Smith, Lanny and Margaret Smith, and Brad and Rita Spencer.

We pray at the death of Irene Rasmussen, asking again for the assurance that Life Matters. Confident that you hear our prayers, we sing: **Listen, Lord**

(SONG)