

Sermon

St. John the Evangelist

7/10/16

The Rev. Noah Van Niel

Proper 10 (C): Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Psalm 25:1-9; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

The weather this past week had a funny way of mirroring the national mood. A week that started with a resplendent fourth of July turned stormy by its end. Gun shots that in one context were fired in joyous celebration right outside our front lawn were soon echoed on shaky mobile cameras uploaded to the internet to be repeated across every news outlet in America. We watched the life drain away from two more black men at the hands of police who did not, it is suffice to say, exhaust all their means for peaceful resolution of the situation and were too quick to pull the trigger and end a life. Leading to renewed questions of whether these two Black lives mattered in their eyes. Alston Sterling and Philando Castile were added to the list of names of young men of color who lost their lives at the hands of those sworn to protect and serve them. And then, crowds who on Monday gathered to watch fireworks were replaced by crowds fleeing for their lives as bullets rained down from above aimed at the courageous men and women in uniform who *were* keeping the peace and doing a good job of it. Five officers-- Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Michael Smith, Lorne Ahrens--gunned down by an angry man with a sniper rifle. As I forced myself to watch the various footage of these incidents, I couldn't help but notice that Mr. Sterling was wearing a red shirt in the video where he was killed. Mr. Castile a white one. And the police officers were in their blues. All of them soaked with blood. Rarely has red white and blue caused such pride and such sorrow in such a short number of days.

Like many of you, I imagine, all of these events made me sick with heartache. They made me angry. They made me afraid. They made me want to stand up and shout: "JUST STOP KILLING EACH OTHER!" They made me feel powerless; like the world was spiraling out of control and I had no idea what I could do, if anything, to settle it down.

I'm tempted to say that what the world needs now, is love, sweet love. For there is just too little of it. But I think what we really need is mercy. Lord, have mercy. Have mercy on us as we continue to give in to our sin and choose violence, choose division, choose hasty and angry judgment. Police have mercy on those many people of color who you come across daily. People have mercy on those policemen and women who put their lives at risk to keep the peace in our cities and towns. Lord have mercy.

In our Gospel passage today, we have an inquisitive lawyer who stands up to ask Jesus what he should be doing to be sure of inheriting eternal life, of entering the Kingdom of God. Jesus asks him what is written in the law, and the man gives a concise summary of the Torah, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself," which Jesus commends to him as the right answer. But not content to leave it there, wanting more specifics about what exactly that means, he asks "And who is my neighbor?" This precipitates the famous parable of the Good Samaritan.

The parable itself is teeming with important details about being willing to help those in need, even those who are your enemies (you remember me saying, multiple times in the past that there was no love lost between Samaritans and Jews). Details which instruct us to give of our time and energy and money in the name of helping others; to put our own agenda on hold and prioritize someone else above ourselves. About the need to get close to the suffering one, not cross to the other side of the street. To touch the wounds of the injured. We need to be moved with pity, have our heart break for them. And make a plan for how they will be restored to full health even after we are gone. All of these things are in the story.

But for me the most important lesson Jesus offers in the parable of the Good Samaritan is a redirection of the lawyer's question. The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" and at the end of the story Jesus asks him, "which of these three was a neighbor to the man who had been robbed and beaten?" It is, obviously, the one who showed him *mercy*. What Jesus is telling him though, and us, is that we need to stop asking "who is my

neighbor?" We need to stop asking, who is on my side? Who is in my circle of caring? As battle lines continue to be drawn across our country—police vs. protesters; rich vs. poor; black vs. white; republican vs. democrat—if we are asking “who is my neighbor?” we are asking the wrong question.

The point is to *be* the neighbor. To *be* the person who shows mercy. Mercy in this context could also read, compassion, which literally means to suffer with and it is the key which unlocks the gates of the Kingdom of God. In the pain that is at the root of all the ruptures in our society, mercy means getting up close to the one who is suffering, and offering to help. It means being a neighbor to those with whom you share little to nothing in common. This is, perhaps, the one thing we *can* do as the world seems to be spinning off its axis. We can hold fast to the promise that to show mercy, to serve others, to be compassionate is the way to jam the guns and stop the violence and start, God willing, the process of healing.

Under the shadow of these gruesome killings, it was BSAFE week here at St. John’s; a week when we, as a community rally to try and show mercy and compassion to a couple hundred kids from Boston who were not born into the same kind of privilege that we have here in Hingham. One of our jobs this week was to serve these kids lunch. On Wednesday I drove up into Boston with three middle schoolers, a couple of adults and almost two hundred sandwiches, snacks and drinks.

It is an overwhelming experience to try and serve lunch to so many hungry kids at once, something Mr. Castile would have known from his job as a cafeteria supervisor at a school in St. Paul Minnesota. As dozens of kids came streaming in to the lunch room to take their seats, full of energy and noise, our three middle schoolers stood on the edges of the room, watching the craziness build. In the middle of this happy chaos, one little girl of color who couldn’t have been more than six, stopped in front of one of our middle school girls, who is white. They both kind of stared at each other for a second. They smiled awkwardly, looking a little shy and then this little girl broke into a huge grin and threw her arms around our kid’s waist, giving her a big hug, before skipping off to her seat. I don’t think they even exchanged a word. She had never met her, probably would never see her again. The whole interchange took about ten seconds. But in that moment I glimpsed, however fleetingly, the hope for what our world could be.

On Friday we hosted about 80 of these kids and their counselors here at St. John’s. They played games, went to a farm, and again we served them lunch. At one point I walked outside and saw a young black girl, hair in beads that rattled as she shook her head, sitting on the pavement joined by another one of our middle school girls, who is white. They were drawing with chalk. They weren’t saying much, but it became apparent when I stooped down to talk to her that Gabby, which was her name and her manner, had formed a quick friendship with our middle schooler. She asked her if she would eat lunch with her and when I later saw them all coming inside for lunch, Gabby and her new friend were walking hand in hand to find a seat.

Now I’m not so naïve as to think that if we all just hugged it out we could solve all the world’s problems and live happily ever after. Our problems are too entrenched for that to work right off the bat. But if this is where we are starting, with hugs and hand-holding, and where we are ending is bullets and blood, that’s a failure of mercy on all our part. As a country, as individuals, as communities, somewhere along the line hugs turn to cold shoulders and open hands turn to fists. We lose the compassion, we lose the connection. But if two children who were strangers, who came from radically different backgrounds could share a hug, could hold a hand of a different hue, could have an attitude that is trusting and open merciful and kind and gracious, then I think there is still hope. This is what it would look like if we all were to *be* the neighbor. As our country fills with chaos, and the storm clouds gather, blocking out the sunbeams that beckon a brighter future, these flickers of color-blind kindness are what I turn to for hope. And then I hear Jesus say to all of us, “Go, and do likewise.”