

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

Job 1:1, 2: 1-10

October 4, 2009

First Federated Church

Peoria, Illinois

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This week has been spiritually jarring to me. I knew that the kids were going to sing *"I Am a Promise; I am a promise, I am a possibility; I am a promise, with a capital P; I am a great big bunch of Potentiality."* That's God's vision of who we are. And then there is the reality.

Last Monday I was literally driven to my knees. I watched a video released by the Chicago Police Department of the beating death of 16 year old Derrion Albert as he walked from school to a bus stop. He was set upon by a gang of youth who knocked him to the ground with a two by four and then proceeded to be brutally kicked, punched and hit with the 2 by 4. It was a frenzied mob scene. The whole mad scene was recorded by someone on their cell phone. Watching the young man finally being dragged into the safety of a storefront, only to die there, I was compelled to fall to my knees in prayer. I ached for the young man who was an honor student with dreams. I ached for his family, for his attackers and for myself. What kind of society do we live in that gives birth to such violence?

It is very easy to dismiss whole scene as something that happens in big cities like Chicago or something that happens in the wrong part of town

or something that happens to “them” but deep down we know that that is simply not true.

In his book Who Speaks for God (New York:Delacorte Press, 1996) Jim Wallis wrote about a story he heard on the radio.

A reporter was covering that conflict in the middle of Sarajevo, and he saw a little girl shot by a sniper. The reporter threw down his pad and pencil, and stopped being a reporter for a few minutes. He rushed to the man who was holding the child, and helped them both into his car.

As the reporter stepped on the accelerator, racing to the hospital, the man holding the bleeding child said, “Hurry, my friend, my child is still alive.”

A moment or two later, “Hurry, my friend, my child is still breathing.”

A moment later, “Hurry, my friend, my child is still warm.”

Finally, “Hurry. Oh, God, my child is getting cold.”

When they got to the hospital, the little girl was dead. As the two men were in the lavatory, washing the blood off their hands and their clothes, the man turned to the reporter and said, “This is a terrible task for me. I must go tell her father that his child is dead. He will be heartbroken.”

The reporter was amazed. He looked at the grieving man and said, “I

thought she was your child.”

The man looked back and said, “No, but aren't they all our children?”

Wallis reflected upon that story with these words, “Yes, they are all our children. They are also God's children as well, and he has entrusted us with their care in Sarajevo, in (Africa), in (Chicago), in Los Angeles, in my hometown of Perry, Georgia, and in Washington, D.C.” pp.72-73.

It was John Donne who so powerfully wrote of our human connectedness in his Meditation XVII:

“No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

If you are of a certain age, say my age, you no doubt remember college dorm rooms that had a poster on the wall that contained a quote from the German theologian Martin Niemoller.

In Germany they first came for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.

Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.

Then they came for me —
and by that time no one was left to speak up.

Last Sunday evening we completed a, perhaps too brief, book study on The Shack by William Paul Young. In it the main character Mackenzie Allen Philips has an audience with God following the brutal death of his youngest daughter, Missy. In one of the exchanges the Holy Spirit personified as a woman gardener says to Mackenzie,

“Your world is severely broken. You demanded your independence, and now you are angry with the one who loved you to give it to you. Nothing is as it should be, as Papa desires it to be, and as it will be one day. Right now your world is lost in darkness and chaos and horrible things happen to those that he is especially fond of.”

“Then why doesn't he do something about it?”

“He already has...”

“You mean what Jesus did?”

“Haven't you seen the wounds on Papa too?”

“I didn't understand them. How could he...?”

“For love. He chose the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love.”

“But I still don’t understand why Missy had to die?”

“She didn’t have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa’s. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish his good purposes. It is you humans who have embraced evil and Papa has responded with goodness. What happened to Missy was the work of evil and no one in your world is immune from it.” (pp. 164-65)

That is very Job-ian. I first ran across the book of Job when I was quite young. I was reading a Peanuts comic strip when Charlie Brown spoke about the problems of Job. Actually, I thought it was “job” not Job. I looked it up and read it and came away rather puzzled. I have read it many times since and find it a bit unsatisfactory.

The book of Job is what is called a “theodicy.” It is a look at the relationships between good and evil and God. I believe that the heart of the story of Job is very profound. It is the struggle of a good man who faces one disaster after another. But the introduction and the conclusion, which most scholars think was added on later, leave me empty. It begins as a wager between the devil and God on whether or not the devil can

cause a good man to curse and turn away from God. I don't think that God wagers on our souls.

The book ends with Job, having lost his health as well as all that he owned, and seeing his family die, being rewarded by God for his faithfulness by being given more riches than before, a long life, a new wife and more children. I do not think that that is an "and they all lived happily ever after" ending because if you have lost someone you love, you know that while you must go on with life's journey, you are never the same. No one can ever "replace" that person. You can love again, but the love will be different.

Having said all of that, at the heart of Job there is a glimmer of gospel.

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.—Job 19:25-27

In Job we see both the vision and the reality.

In the sacrament that we are about to celebrate we also see the vision and the reality, but we also see the Promise.

The vision is this: *In my Father's house there are many mansions. I go now to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place for you I shall come again unto you to receive you unto myself, so that where I am there you shall be also.*

We also see the reality. "In this world you shall have trouble," Jesus told his disciples.

And the Promise, " But do not lose heart, for I have overcome the world."

There are times when life is very hard. There are times when we lose courage, when we lose hope, when we think that we cannot go on. There are times when we will be driven to our knees by the world around us. But this Table reminds us that we are not alone. There is Another beside us; one who has seen the worst and passed through it. One who loves us with a love that will never let us go. One who promises to show us the way to true life if we are willing to but follow.

The risen Lord invites all of those who trust him to enjoy the meal that he has prepared.