

A World of Pain – July 17, 2016

Scripture readings

- Genesis 18:1-10a – 10b. And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him ... so Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’
- Colossians 1:15-28 – God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, ... by making peace through the blood of his cross.
- Luke 10:38-42 – Martha was distracted by her many tasks ... Mary has chosen the better part.

Summary

After another week of extreme violence, our desire is to alleviate the suffering of the world but we don't know what to do. We feel helpless and wonder if our prayers are an adequate response.

Sermon Notes

The Dalai Lama suggests that these problems are not overcome only through prayers. Humans created these problems, not God, but we are paralyzed and afraid to engage in action to relieve the suffering in this world. Yet we are also part of God's work in the world, so we are called to work for justice and peace and harmony among all people. Prayer helps us, through God's wisdom and guidance, to act in love and compassion.

I was preparing for a wedding this week, which reminded me of the first wedding I performed, right after 9/11. It was a time of profound pain and suffering, anger and calls for revenge, and so much unhelpful rhetoric regarding what we, as a country, should do next. In that time, we sat together to witness the service of holy matrimony. In the exchange of rings, each person vows, “... with all that I am and all that I have, I honor you.” In this sacrament, we see God's vision of the world, the bonds of love in the covenant relationship. Thus, we are all called to be in love with God and with the world, for its sake and for our own, to give our whole heart to being with one another.

The reading from Genesis shows Abraham becoming conscious of God's blessing and his own role in serving humanity. In the exchange of words following the serving of cakes and water, Sarah hears that she is to bear a son. Sarah laughs heartily, because she and Abraham are both far too “withered” to procreate. (Sometimes ... “Laughter is the only thing that'll keep you sane / In this world that's crying more and more everyday ... *) Yet the promise of God is life and light and peace, even when there seems to be no possibility of that promise.

The passage from Luke brings us the familiar story of Mary and Martha. Martha is busy doing her part, in service to those who are present. We sometimes feel we have to do something, anything, but we may be reacting to a chaotic world that makes no sense. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening, waiting, perhaps in silence to learn what

her purpose will be, how she might offer something that alleviates the suffering in the world. In these times, we may feel the need to relieve our own suffering through a certain stillness before we are able to offer relief to others.

In a world that is suffering, we need both prayer and service. We decrease suffering in ourselves through prayer and through listening. We decrease suffering in others through our service to them. Whether we are called first to do or to listen is how we differ from one another. Be assured, however. A prayer of peace several times a day from each of us will not hurt anything. An act of service toward someone in need can only help.

The question for each of us is to ask ourselves, what could I do today to offer all that I am and all that I have to healing the suffering in this world.

When we get angry, we suffer. If you really understand that, you also will be able to understand that when the other person is angry, it means that she is suffering. When someone insults you or behaves violently towards you, you have to be intelligent enough to see that the person suffers from his own violence and anger. But we tend to forget. We think that we are the only one that suffers, and the other person is our oppressor. This is enough to make anger arise, and to strengthen our desire to punish. We want to punish the other person because we suffer. Then, we have anger in us; we have violence in us, just as they do. When we see that our suffering and anger are no different from their suffering and anger, we will behave more compassionately. So understanding the other is understanding yourself, and understanding yourself is understanding the other person. Everything must begin with you.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh, Anger

* Lyrics from *Live Forever*, by Drew Holcomb