

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Second Sunday after Pentecost/June 18, 2017

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It is hard to be “harassed and helpless,” when, sometimes like the crowd that Jesus saw, that is just where we are. Faith is what allows us to be helpless. We need to have faith in the Great Shepherd who never leaves any one of us. Or as Paul said, it is hard to suffer, though suffering produces endurance. We need hope that springs from God’s love that has been poured into our hearts. Faith enables us to be helpless when that is just where we are; and hope gives us the mindset to endure suffering when that is our lot. Without faith and hope helplessness is too much for most of us and we end up taking things into our own hands. I wonder if that was the spiritual condition of the gunman who opened fire on Republican lawmakers while at a baseball practice for an enjoyable game against Democrats that took place as scheduled on Thursday night. The contrast between a game of good cheer and shooting to kill was jarring.

John Updike was one of the great writers of the 20th century. In a book of poetry published after his death in 2009 there is a poem entitled simply “Baseball.”

Baseball was
invented in America, where beneath
the good cheer and sly jazz the chance
of failure is everybody’s right,
beginning with baseball.

He explains:

There is nowhere to hide when the ball’s
spotlight swivels your way,

and the chatter around you falls still,
and the mothers on the sidelines,
your own among them, hold their breaths,
and you whiff on a terrible pitch
or in the infield achieve
something with the ball so
ridiculous you blush for years.
It's easy to do....

Anyone who has ever played hardball or softball or even whiffle ball knows this experience. Even the pros will let a ground ball slip between their legs or chase a curveball into the dirt. It's easy to do. Inevitably there will come a time in baseball when even the best of us are made to feel harassed and helpless. Failure is everybody's right. Baseball forces us to admit our humanness, and perhaps be more tolerant of others when their achievement is blushinglly ridiculous.

Nobody likes to be helpless. The Israelites make a covenant with God in our first reading this morning. The people agree to be a holy nation. Then come chapters of laws that are the people's response to God's saving love. Finally, after 13 chapters of this, Moses is delayed in coming down from Mount Sinai. The people feel harassed and helpless and instead of allowing themselves to sit with this feeling, they take matters into their own hands. They build themselves a golden calf to worship instead of the God who delivered them from slavery. It is a whiff on a terrible pitch. Today some feel that a gun or a knife will fix things and instead get themselves in a fix and bring down others with them. When helpless we are tempted to grab whatever will give us power instead of allowing ourselves to be grasped by God who will give us love.

We have to allow ourselves to be human. In a sense that is when hope begins. We trust in God whose love is poured into our hearts even when we fail. "Perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Our humanness and fallibility do not remove us from God's love; amazingly they place us right in the path of it. God loves us as we are, and so even in our

helplessness we are able to hope. In fact, we are so sure of this love that we can praise God even in affliction. A friend of mine throws up her hands and says “Alleluia anyway!”

When we are in conflict with others, when we have disagreement, we remain in relation with God. That means we do not cut them off, or cut them down. There is a deep peace beyond our argumentation that is of God. Those whom we oppose share in our humanness – failure is everybody’s right as baseball teaches. Christ died for them, too. So, hard as we might oppose them, we do not violate their dignity as a person or seek to do them grave injustice or harm. It is our way of being in the world. We try to reflect the character of the God whose love has seized us. When we are weak we look to God’s power that is perfected in us. When we suffer it is God’s promise that gives us hope. And in the Prince of peace we find peace.

Okay, so sometimes we forget. We do not live up to the best in us – the good that God calls out of us. We fall below our environment and take matters into our own hands. Nevertheless, in giving ourselves to God, God restores our souls. Jesus is intent on recovering his defiant and willful people. We rediscover our lost image – that we are people of peace and hope and the power of love. And in this we rise above our environment.

This is the work upon which Jesus sets his followers. It is your work and mine. Jesus prays that laborers be sent out into the harvest. Then names his disciples, all twelve of them. They are given authority to heal the lost, to mend the broken. And so are we. We who are wounded are sent to the wounded. What we have to offer is ourselves and our faith and hope in the God who fills our hearts with love. That’s all; and that’s enough. We who are helpless are sent to sustain the helpless. The gift we offer is faith. We who suffer are sent to the suffering. The gift we have is hope. We who disagree with others are sent to those who disagree with us. This is the nature of democracy. The gifts we bring are the courage of our convictions and also respect for the dignity of every human being. Jesus prays that laborers be sent out into this harvest. This is the ministry on which each one of us embarks.

We are learning how to be human, and witnessing what that means to others. Helplessness takes faith in God, not taking things into our own hands. Baseball is a field of play not a killing field. It too teaches us to be human. As Updike concludes: failure is everybody's right. Sometimes our achievements are so ridiculous we blush for years. Welcome to the human condition. But the human condition is God's decision to be ever present, ever loving. The human condition is Jesus' petition to send out laborers. We are pros at being human. Faith and hope are the talents that we bring. Love and peace are what we find. We are sent into the harvest of humankind. So, "Come, labor on. No time for rest, till glows the western sky, till the long shadows o'er our pathway lie, and a glad sound comes with the setting sun, 'Servants, well done.'"

Amen.