

Isaiah 52: 13 – 53: 12
Hebrews 10: 16-25
John 18:1 – 19: 37
Good Friday

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“The Parents Circle”

To say that the current situation in the Holy Land is complicated is to make a stunning understatement. The tangled webs of history, culture, religion, international politics, economics, geography, and the desires of many nations and peoples all conspire to make understanding what is happening in the Holy Land a life-time's effort. One can read many books, speak to many people, try very hard to grasp the issues that underlie the events we read in the news, and still end up baffled by it all. Peace in the Holy Land has been scarcer than water since biblical times. There is something about this land that inspires passionate commitments, deep resentments, and intractable challenges for anyone outside this place. The Holy Land has been the graveyard for many well-meaning outsiders seeking to bring peace.

Good Friday is, in some ways, yet another sad, painful moment in the long history of violence and hatred that has plagued the Holy Land for centuries. In some ways, this one execution by the Roman overlords was hardly noteworthy. The Romans had done this sort of thing before and would do so again and again. The Romans only executed the person they were told was the ring-leader and ignored all the others. It was a bit messy and not as carefully organized as the Romans might have liked, but Jerusalem at Passover was always a volatile place and it was best to get this over with as quickly as possible so as not to inflame the people any more than was necessary. It is not at all clear what the Romans really thought about whether this one crucifixion would solve the problems of these difficult and stiff-necked people and history tells us that years later, the Romans would simply obliterate The Temple, Jerusalem, and all that it stood for in another effort to bring peace to this troubled place. As it happened, in their turn, the Romans were obliterated by other peoples, other empires. Indeed, the history of Jerusalem and the Holy Land is a textbook case of one empire after another destroying the previous rulers, taking over the remains, building a new empire on top of the old, and being replaced in its time with yet another empire. Sometimes, it all seems senseless, intractable, and endless. Human violence seems to be built into our DNA and eternally resistant to any efforts to end it. On this remembrance of Good Friday, we might well despair of ever altering this bloody pattern of domination of people by others and uses of violence as control over others.

In the midst of our recent trip to the Holy Land, we were privileged to spend a bit of time with representatives of a most remarkable organization. Founded in 1995, the Parents Circle is a group of about 600 families, both Israeli and Palestinian, who have had members of their family killed in the on-going conflict between Israel and Palestine. Some families have had their sons or daughters killed in combat while others had daughters or sons killed in suicide bombings or stabbings. The organization bills itself as the one organization no one wants to join because you must have had a family member killed in the conflict to be eligible. The members do not necessarily agree on the political solutions to this conflict, an episodic conflict that has continued since the 1940's. What they agree on is that each family has lived through the pain and suffering of the death of a child or sibling or husband or wife. Each family has had their ordinary world

turned into chaos by the dreaded phone call that comes when least expected. Each family has agonized in the uncertain moments that always follow the outburst of violence, praying that they might be spared; that some miracle might have occurred, that their daughter took another bus, went by another route, or was in the other group. Each family has had hope snatched from them and replaced with the cruel reality that death has come to their door-step. These two representatives shared with us their stories, shared the photos of their children who were killed, shared their grief and disbelief. One might think this would fuel more violence, more anger, more reprisals, more death. Even after all the years, both representatives revealed the pain that never ends.

But they took that pain, shared it with one another, opened their hearts to one another, and vowed that they would work to see that no new members of this group would ever be made. They go, in pairs and groups to Israeli schools and Palestinian schools, they speak to neighborhoods, they speak to anyone who will listen to find another way than the senseless repetition of death. They stand in their lonely solidarity – the club of grieving parents and family members – to say no more. It is not easy work for they must re-live their pain with each presentation. It is not appreciated in some circles because it calls out the true cost of continuing the conflict, the human cost of political games, the true bill of wheeling and dealing with the lives of the innocent and the young. It is not easy work because it names who dies when leaders argue and make threats.

We are not far from the conflicts of the Holy Land. Our society is divided by so many challenges and problems. Violence lurks in our world – held back in some ways, but always burbling below the surface. We, too, are capable of mindless violence; we should not think ourselves all that different from the people of the Holy Land. We are closer to having our chapter of the Parents Circle than we know. Some would argue we already do.

We are afforded, each year on Good Friday, to contemplate the foolishness and failure of human violence. The cross and tomb are real; death came to Jesus as it does to all of us. Jesus died to show us that love can and will conquer death. Jesus forgave all those who did him wrong. Jesus invited the thief who repented to join him that day in heaven. And we know that Jesus forgave all his disciples and offered them peace and fellowship. Jesus walked into the corridors of power and stood fast in the power of unconditional love. Yes, the powers of this world killed his body but they did not and could not kill his soul nor could they alter the arc of his life and teachings. Love won even though no one knew it that dark afternoon before the Passover. Rome is gone, the Temple is gone, empires are dust; but love remains and hope never dies. Love wins now even if few of us can see it through all the fear and violence that seems to be so prevalent. Love wins every time two of the members of the Parents Circle –one Israeli, one Palestinian - go to a school together to meet children and to tell them how paltry violence is; how little it helps anyone. Love wins every time we accept that we are all children of God, beloved by God, and begged by God to live into our better selves.

We all have seen the worst that humans can do. We all know we are capable of great violence and wrong-doing. We have each been to Calvary – as perpetrators or spectators. We have created the conditions in which innocent children die. But Calvary, the Cross and Tomb, also tell us that there is another way. There is the Way of Jesus; there is the Way of life and truth and joy and abundance and love. If two parents, each of whom buried a beloved child because of the

madness of the world around them, can sit with a group of strangers, re-live those terrifying moments of grief and loss, and vow as one to never stop until this insanity ends, then, yes, love really does triumph. Love is stronger than hate; love is stronger than violence; love is stronger than death. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.