

RUNNYMEDE UNITED CHURCH

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 4, 2009, pm

Worldwide Communion Sunday

Mark 10:2–16, Psalm 26

“Bread for the World”

Last night, after most of us had gone to sleep, Christians entered Christ Church, Anglican, on the ridge of Montefiore Hill, overlooking the city of Adelaide, Australia; and, like those attending Andong Presbyterian in Seoul, watched their pastors take bread in their hands, saying, “The body of Christ. “ While we were still sleeping, Christians in Nairobi, in Assisi, in the Church of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem watched leaders take bread and say ‘This is my body’. As we were waking, a hush fell Bath’s beautiful Abbey, as the priest declared, “The body of our Lord.” In churches across North and South America, this morning and afternoon, religious leaders take bread into their hands and declare, “The body of Christ, the bread of life.” In thatched-roof mission stations across Pacific islands this afternoon, others will hear again: “This is my body.”

Worldwide Communion Sunday: churches of various denominations, in all nations, in many languages, celebrate around God’s table. Most, in sadness or fear or joy, hear the text we’ve heard. After speaking of the sacredness of a covenant, a solemn vow, Jesus speaks of divorce. His words underline the significance of protecting the vulnerable, for to his audience there was never any question of a woman asking for divorce. Only men could do so, for a variety of reasons. Women had no protection. As Jesus answers, ‘what God has joined, let no one separate’, he speaks of the reciprocity of relationships, in which the welfare of another person must be a basic concern. And so it is with children: ‘He took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them.’

Jesus’ words nurture us. On this day, may they invite us into a time to remember and to honour our connections with the rest of the world. We need to savor the bread and the fruit from God’s vineyard - and also work to save them. One without the other will not do. We need to dream of a day when people will care for others, when children will be blessed, when the world will be able to celebrate the advent of peace, the end of violence, to dream of a day when God’s vineyard yields the fullness of the harvest of justice, compassion and love. Today we remember our connection to the one who is Bread for the World, and our connections to the world God loves. These connections bind us, whether in responding to disaster in our

community or around the world, by planning a mission trip to Africa, or by coming together to make Toronto streets safe for all.

As those who follow Jesus, we remember that the table of grape and grain calls us to be that connection of grace and justice with others. Today, around the world, we remember that Christ has no hands, but ours, no feet but ours, no heart, but the heart in us.

“And he took them up in his arms and... blessed them.” The words used mean ‘blessed them fervently’. Can you picture it?

What does that blessing mean? In terrible moments of tragedy that engulf us - a young man, his family and relatives, neighbours, colleagues, friends, so many of you present today - questions like this loom large before us. Eric Clapton asked them poignantly in ‘*Tears in Heaven*’, his response to his own young son’s death. We’ve each asked these questions ourselves. We have asked them together. Why? Why so young? Why this way? What now?

Time can bring you down; time can break your heart!, Clapton sang. We know that, too. We know that whenever someone we love dies, we, too, die a little. We know that we can never be exactly the same again. It is a heart-rending experience.

In Psalm 26, another of the texts being heard in many congregations this Sunday, the Psalmist writes: “Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind; for your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you.”

But, when one of us is snatched away from all of the rest of us, forever; when someone with whom our lives were woven is ripped away from us, when someone dies--then there gapes a wound which takes the care of every part of us for healing.

“Prove me, try me... God.” Yes, but: Questions, all kinds of questions emerge. Resentment, anger: we hurt, for ourselves and others. Grief springs from deep inside us. Our feelings and our questions are part of our humanity.

All our lives, I think, we wrestle with the meaning of suffering, the question, why? But the psalmist and Jesus point us toward our hope: the faith that God whose heart broke with ours on the cross, lives and dies with each of us, walking with us through the pain. And so we hear, again, the affirmations: Jesus blesses the children and blesses us. The psalmist walks in faithfulness to God. And so may we.

Amidst the hard realities of life and death is the promise of God to be with us. In that hope we can affirm that David lives in all our hearts and in God's care...

The question is not why did God send such tragedy. God did not. God is not the explanation but the permanent presence that refuses to give suffering the last word. The question really is: How do we respond in faith and hope, with care for others? We start in faith that God is with us in the worst of situations, aching with our pain, weeping in our tears, surprising our feeble strength with power and resilience we never guessed we had. That faith brings hope, the ability to care.

Today is also the day when many celebrate St. Francis of Assisi, who lived over 800 years ago, the son of a wealthy family.

He was, we are told the 'party animal' of Assisi in his day - lots of money, lots of wine, singing and friends - and like many of us who are comfortable he tried to numb his mind to suffering around him.

Then one day Francis met a leper in the street, one people avoided, for his skin was covered with infected sores. Usually Francis would turn away. But this time he faced his own horror, and dared himself to confront it. Now he saw not a leper, but a human being in pain. Francis embraced and kissed the leper....

It was a moment that changed his life. He became a monk and started teaching about helping people. He said it wasn't enough to be for other people - you had to be with them. Then he turned to all God's creatures. He saw how mistreated some animals were. And he began to teach that all God's creation should be treated with reverence....

He also taught about prayers and peace: His most famous prayer and hymn: "God make me a channel / an instrument of your peace..."

May that prayer speak to us, this day.

Last night, after most of us had gone to sleep, Christians in the east prayed with anguished tears and offered aid and help to people in Samoa, Tonga, Sumatra and the Philippines. "The body of Christ". While we were still sleeping, others prayed and worked to find ways to address terrible drought in Kenya. Churches in Italy worked to aid victims of mud-slides there, and congregations in England and across North and South America continue to try to assist and to address the responsibilities of all of us to take the world in our hands, to care for it, and for each other. Today, in this congregation

and in many around the world, as religious leaders take bread into their hands and declare, "The body of Christ, the bread of life," many hear those words with fresh resolve: to care for the world and each other, for we are the body of Christ

Beyond the shadow of death is the light of the world. Beyond the cross is an empty tomb. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. These are statements of faith we share with others around the world, on this worldwide communion Sunday. God is with us. That is the peace and promise of this day. Thanks be to God.

Lillian Perigoe