

It is an ugly time, I am afraid.

That is the honest truth.

Everywhere you turn, it seems, another child is dying: from a missile strike on a United Nations safehouse in Gaza, from exposure to the elements crossing the border of the Arizona desert, from arson and stabbing and malnutrition right here in our own town of Troy.

And as much as I have said—over and over again—in the past two months that we must begin with celebration, that God created us *very good*, in God's very own *good* image . . .

. . . the truth is that we are now, *millennia* into the divine experiment of being human on this planet, making quite a mess of our goodness . . .

. . . and our children suffer the most:

'Trouble
Hard times
Hatred
Hunger
Homelessness
Bullying threats
Backstabbing
Killed in cold blood because they are hated
Sitting ducks; picked off one by one'

And I confess. I am tempted. To despair:

'wordless sighs'
'aching groans'

And I am not even the one living such trauma.

But the Apostle Paul . . . is.

For Paul these things are personal: hardship, famine, persecution, war. And for Paul these things are also political. As they really are for everyone. Because politics, like religion, is simply the way human beings figure out how to get along in the world together. And in our politics, as in our religion, we are failing miserably.

Paul, himself, is no stranger to that failure. In his early life, before he commits to the nonviolent Way of Jesus, the Way of loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you, Paul zealously persecutes those with whom he disagrees. Up to, and including, stoning them to death.

Paul is no stranger to the failure of politics and of religion to help us humans figure out how to get along together. In his early life, before he commits to the nonviolent Way of Jesus, to the Way of loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you, Paul believes that the best way for the people of God to confront evil in the world is to accommodate it or to isolate from it or to insist that evil belongs to 'all those other bad people' and not to 'us righteous ones.' And Paul goes so far as work on eliminating 'those other bad people' through what, today, we would call religious genocide.

And he is wrong.

And he knows he is wrong when the risen Christ appears to him in a blinding light and demands to know, 'why are you persecuting me?' Meaning, 'why are you persecuting my people?' Meaning 'why are you persecuting *any* people?'

Meaning STOP IT!

Because 'those other people' are nothing but mirror images of yourself. Human beings. From the humus of the earth. Bearing the divine imprint. Breathing the very breath of God.

Just like you.

And Paul gets it.

And he changes his heart and mind. And he changes his life. Which is what it means 'to repent.'

We do well to stand in awe of the Apostle Paul's conversion, put in its proper context. Which is not, as Christian tradition has taught for so long, a conversion from the religion of first-century Judaism to the religion of first-century Christianity. 'Christianity' as a distinct religion separate from Judaism does not exist at the time of Paul's writing.

Paul's conversion, in its proper context, is a conversion from a vision of justice as violence to a nonviolent vision of justice as radical, communal, steadfast, resurrecting *love*. It is, in the words of the New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, a conversion from 'the normalcy of civilization's injustice' to 'the radicality of God's justice.'

Even in the face of persecution.

And this time, Paul is right.

But it costs him. Not just in the loss of the only support system he knows at the time. But throughout the course of his ministry: as he is constantly on the move, shipwrecked, imprisoned, beaten, hungry, cold, placed under house arrest, and, finally, 'killed in cold blood because [he is] hated,' at the hand of the Roman 'injustice' system. Among the very people to whom he has written the letter that is our Scripture lesson today.

How, we most certainly should ask, in such an ugly time, living through such horrific trauma, does Paul find the grace—and, quite frankly, the *audacity*—to proclaim emphatically and prophetically that 'nothing living or

dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable, absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love'?

How can he say, in such an ugly time, living through such horrific trauma, that "God makes all things work together for good with those who love God"?

And *mean* it?

The answer, I think, is this: in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Paul sees (again in the words of John Dominic Crossan) that "the violent normalcy of human civilization is not the inevitable destiny of human nature."

Let me say that again.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see—once and for all—that 'the violent normalcy of human civilization is *not* the inevitable destiny of human nature.'

Our 'inevitable destiny' is, instead, our *own* participation in the resurrection life, as a *communal* process for us all, of one great collaborative human effort to 'return no one evil for evil' but to 'repay evil with good.'

And thereby usher in the very reign of God.

Because it is the only thing that will save us from ourselves.

So what does that mean for us, the good people of God here in Troy, filled with our own 'wordless sighs,' with our own 'aching groans' for the death of children everywhere and the mess we have made of this *very good* creation?

I think we have to start with a conversion of our own, in the manner of the Apostle Paul.

The great theologian, Karl Barth, in confronting the violence that had taken over his beloved Christendom in Nazi Germany, came to believe that 'rightly understood, there are no Christians. There is only the eternal opportunity of becoming Christians.' Meaning that we are constantly *in the process of* conversion to the nonviolent, radical Way of the love of Jesus.

So let's begin today. And let's begin at home. Right here with the people right in front of us. With the one person we need to forgive this week. With the one person we need to ask for forgiveness this week. With the one change in lifestyle we need to make this week. With the one prayer for resurrection we need to make this week.

Trusting that our own small part of contributing to the kingdom of God can have a ripple effect beyond our wildest imagination. Because of the way that Jesus, our Master, has embraced us.

Working all things together . . .

For good!

I pray it may be so.

Amen.