

Homily

The Rev. Melody N. Rockwell

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 22

Christ Episcopal Church, Cedar Rapids, IA

October 1 & 2, 2011

Lectionary:

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Today is October 2nd. It is the International Day of Non-Violence, and the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "There are many causes I am prepared to die for, but no causes that I am prepared to kill for." This stands in marked contrast to our readings for today, where violence, destruction and devastating loss weigh heavily in the vineyard scriptures. Jesus tells a parable of wicked tenants, who abuse and beat the vineyard owner's messengers, and then kill his son. In Isaiah, we learn that God provided all that was needed to produce a cornucopia of justice and righteousness in the vineyard of Israel. But, the harvest yielded wild, bitter useless grapes. God "expected justice, but found bloodshed; expected righteousness, but heard a cry."

The psalmist rails against God about the destroyed vineyard of Israel, "Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?" Today, the vineyard of our world is ripped apart with bloodshed and cries. Natural disasters, wars, epidemics, poverty, corruption, cruelty and greed savage our planet. The cries for justice and restoration pummel us 24/7, and it is unbearable, overwhelming. Where do we begin? Let's begin with the children.

During the last two months, our congregation has prayed in the prayers of the people for child mortality to be reduced. We pray: *Lord, invest our hearts with active concern for the death of each beloved child every three seconds due to diseases caused by unclean water, lack of sanitation and poor nutrition. Bless the ministries of those whose labors reduce child mortality. Challenge us to stay the course with prayer and advocacy, so that sickness may be turned to health and sorrow to joy for all the little ones throughout your kingdom. Amen.*

Millennium Development Goal #4, reducing child mortality, is one of many enormous global challenges. The good news is that the active international focus on this goal is making a substantial difference; more children are living past age five. Between 1990 and 2008, the mortality rate for children under age five in developing countries dropped by 28 percent – that is, by more than one-fourth. Still, we are falling far short of reaching the goal of life for many children who die of preventable or treatable causes; more than one-third die simply because they don't have enough food to eat. Ensuring proper nutrition is critical.

To visualize what this means, you are invited to participate in gluing popsicle sticks to a cross to represent the number of children who die from preventable diseases during the time of one Christ Church worship service. As you do this, you may also want to consider each stick as representing one child who is being fed through the generosity of this parish. We at Christ Church work with our partners in Swaziland to help feed over 900 children in Anglican Neighborhood Care Centers. At this time,

with the economic collapse in Swaziland, our partnership is even more critical for the wellbeing of the children there.

Our partners in Swaziland, include people like Rev. Orma Mavimbela, who retired early from a well-paid professional position because she felt irrevocably drawn to care for orphaned children. Orma thought it made no sense to do this. She wondered how she could meet the huge need of hundreds of hungry children on her limited income. But, Orma gave in and gave her life over to God's call to her. She now manages feeding and care for nearly 300 children and many elderly, impoverished adults. When Gogo (granny) Siphewe Fakudze retired, she initiated a soup kitchen at her rural homestead. At 86, she doesn't have much in the way of material goods, but she shares what she has and organizes others in her area to volunteer and provide food for the children. All over Swaziland, we have friends who are dedicated to procuring, cooking and feeding food to orphans and other vulnerable children. In this way, in a tiny nation in Africa, the cries are being heard... part of the vineyard of God is being restored.

Each year, the youth of Christ Church rehearse and perform a spring concert or musical to raise funds each year to feed the Swazi children. This is one way among many for our kids to get connected with others, who though they live far away, are our vineyard neighbors. Pastor Delores S. Williams notes, "It is important for our children to see us and to help us be involved in the tending of the soil beyond our own little vineyards – to see and help us work in the larger society to make a better and more just world for all people. This kind of involvement introduces our children to goals not inspired by greed..." And I would add, when we are involved with our young people in this way, we become more deeply grounded as good stewards in God's kingdom.

And here at home, parish members are involved in nourishing children in the Cedar Rapids area through donating food and cash, picking up truckloads of food and serving the 100+ guests, many of them children, who come each Tuesday to the Loaves and Fishes food pantry. Others faithfully volunteer at Green Square Meals on the first Tuesday of each month and during the summer months, help out at the Neighborhood Meals and Enrichment Program. More volunteers are needed. *The vineyard is most often in our own back yard.*

We are the current tenants in the vineyard of God's kingdom. What choices are we making to produce the fruits of the kingdom? Rev. James Burns proclaims, "God's love, care and protection come with an expectation: justice and righteousness, and right social relationships." He nudges us beyond just talking about it or 'making nice.' "Justice and righteousness are not something we practice for extra credit," he says, *"they are the main point..."*

What does restoration look like for you? Are you drawn to nurturing God's kingdom through ecological restoration, addressing economic and ethnic inequalities, visiting the lonely, praying and listening to those in distress, being there for your kids while they are growing up and often even when they are grown... Whatever you are committed to and passionate about, remember to

recognize the value in relationships -- at home, in church, at work, in service and indeed, within you. Encounter Christ, come to know Christ and restore God's vineyard through these relationships.

With the psalmist, we pray, "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." We ask God to restore us so that we may engage in restoration.

Paul proclaims in Philippians, "I want to know Christ!" In The Message translation of his words, he asserts, "I'm not saying I have this all together, that I have it made. But I'm well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us -- to Jesus. I'm off and running and I'm not turning back. So let's keep focused on that goal."

Yes, let's press on, keeping our eye on the prize of becoming co-restorers with Christ. Amen.