

# *Sermon: Pentecost 8*

The Rev. Mike Wernick

July 10, 2016

Year C

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalm 25:1-9

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

My heart is grieving... too many in the world are besieged by ancient tribalism... by fear... by divisiveness... there are too many people who believe the ends justify the means... there are too many people... like Micah Johnson... who allow what they feel... what they believe... to determine what they do... with tragic results... because our modern tribal weapons are far worse than sticks and stones... and too many police families in Dallas now know this first-hand...

There is too much polarization... it has become difficult to be civil... to hear each other... to be neighbors... but there is a word of hope... beneath storm-blown ocean waves... there is stillness on the ocean floor... beneath the chaos swirling around us... there is an immovable... grounded silence of which we are a part... and from which we draw our being...

We are all formed... by our families of origin... by our civil and religious educations... by our friendships... and by other leaders... we are formed by how we see these people respond to events in our lives and in the world... by their facial expressions... by the words they choose to use... and sometimes by what we see them do... we are all formed... and it's our hope that those who form us are well-formed themselves...

And we are formed by our beliefs... but we need to guard against making them into idols... if you lived in fourteenth century France... during the Avignon Papacy... you may have believed that your French pope was legitimate... and that anyone who followed the pope in Rome was going to hell... if you were on board Christopher Columbus' ship... and listened to those who said the world was flat... you may have wondered whether you were going to fall off the edge... when you believe that

homosexuality is an abomination... you say it's too bad that more queers weren't killed in Orlando... the way Pastor Steven Anderson did... if you are white and struggle year after year to make ends meet... if you never feel like anyone cuts you any slack... you may think white privilege is a myth... but those who study race relations know it exists... those who lose loved ones to violence or incarceration... in disproportionate numbers... know it does...

Episcopalian Sean Glenn wrote: *it's easy for us... as well-intentioned white people... to decry the violence in our midst... but until we begin the hard... uncomfortable work of dismantling an entire way of life—dare I say an entire reading of the world—built upon the idolatrous sin of white supremacy... we do nothing other than continue to name a sin from a safe... "respectable" distance... without confessing it. Until we confess it... we cannot repent of it... and we cannot repent if we refuse to take seriously our own participation in this sin... for it is by our own inaction... just as much as our action (intentional or unintentional)... that we allow its actualization...*

Unless we repent... unless we decide to turn away from racism... it won't happen... and the prospect of dismantling it can be terrifying... because again... feelings are always real... they are emotions... energy in motion... states of being... how we are... but we need to remain mindful that sometimes... they are not based in fact... my daughter once felt scared... that there was a monster outside her bedroom window... the feeling was real... palpably real... I could see it in her face... but I knew it was not based in fact... but even still... I held her... and comforted her... and reassured her that I would take care of and protect her... I didn't invalidate her feelings... or tell her how stupid she was for feeling it... humiliate or shame her... my heart was open to her... that's how we all need to be with each other...

But when we spend the time... listening to people's stories... if we're willing to be vulnerable for them... to be a safe place for their most fragile selves... then I think we

can understand their disappointment... the feeling of being overlooked... passed over... singled out... we can understand the resentment... the hopelessness...

Because when you're stopped for being the wrong color in a white neighborhood... when your city is never revitalized the way elected leaders promise... when your water is poisoned by lead and your children's development is being compromised... for more than a year... when your feelings of concern... which are based in fact... are trivialized or ignored all together... it's possible to understand and empathize with that frustration and anger... we must let people protest... mourn... and shine a light on the injustice that has been going on longer than we have been alive... it is unjust to ask them to keep those energies-in-motion... bottled up...

A white friend of mine... who's a priest in Columbus, OH... and who has adopted two black children... is concerned that his son may end up like Philander Castile... or Alton Sterling... in my opinion... this concern is based in fact... and Friday evening... while he was riding his bike through the neighborhood... he came across three little children playing in an empty lot... they saw him... and began running away and yelling: *The police! The police!* ... he wrote... *We live in the inner city... the only police we see are in cars or helicopters... and the interactions are always tense. Julie [his wife] saw a cop screech to a halt... and start chewing out a black guy who was on the sidewalk with his bike... Julie pulled out her phone to record a video... the cop saw it and got into his car and drove away. That's why the children have learned to run...* and no one should experience this...

Lutheran Pastor Fred Niedner wrote... this Gospel lesson is among those so familiar... we could easily enough hear it and go on without a homily... to the hymn of the day... but what Jesus is saying to us is... *let your insides be stirred and your heart wrung until it aches... and you're tired... and alone... and have little to offer anyone... and THEN go find your calling in some ditch in the middle of nowhere where some stranger lies broken...* Sure Jesus... we thought you'd never ask...

But Jesus' conversation partner is a lawyer... and wanting to justify himself... he asks Jesus a great question... *And who precisely is my neighbor...* theologian Frederick Buechner offered a lawyer-ly response...

*a neighbor... herein after referred to as the party of the first part... is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence... unless there is another person of Jewish descent... herein after referred to as the party of the second part... living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself... in which case the party of the second part is construed as neighbor to the party of the first part... and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever...*

Niedner wrote... we've played the part of that lawyer... what he wanted more than anything was to be right... and especially righter than Jesus... whose take on things had gotten a bit confusing... ever since he'd set his face so stubbornly toward Jerusalem... the lawyer wanted clarity... limits... distinctions... and a reachable vision...

But Christ doesn't call us to orthodoxy... correctness... and superior enlightenment... at least not as life-giving forces... instead... he bids us... *Come die with me... take up your cross... every day... and follow me... you will find your life by losing it...*

And then Jesus headed straight for the ditch... where soon he was left not just half-dead... but whole-dead... dead as the women who never dreamed of how awful their own end would be when Jerusalem fell... dead as the executioners who nailed him and so many others to crosses... and who maybe glimpsed once in a while how their own souls died a bit every time they killed someone else...

The Samaritan... who had good reason to walk right by... did not... maybe it was because he knew what is was to be an outcast... maybe it was because he knew what it

was to be ridiculed... or minimized... or disbelieved... or harassed... maybe it was because he knew what it was to be broken... that he had compassion on the broken ditch-man... and to help us understand just how astounding that was... how astounding that would be... it would be as if Micah Johnson... in spite of how he felt... stopped to help a white cop... who had been beat up and left in a ditch... that somehow in his formation... he was able to name how he felt... but choose to do something different... to experience that how we feel... what we believe about monsters outside the window... does not have to determine what we do...

Niedner wrote... that deep and dangerous ditch is everywhere... I have not escaped it... though God knows... like the lawyer... I have tried... it's a way of life with my tribe... one way or another... we run our lives into some pit or another... just as I have watched my elders do... I have labored and thirsted after perfection... and it has cost me plenty of heartache I can blame on no one else... I fear I have unwittingly taught my children the same things... and my teaching will run them into a ditch... how I wish I could spare them... but I cannot... my point... he wrote... is that all roads lead to the ditch...

But in our half-dead ditch walking... we meet the one who is whole-dead... and her compassion... and heart... and tightly-wrenched insides won't let her pass us by... and she has enough baptismal water to wash us... enough oil to anoint us... and enough bread and wine to feed us... and we gather ourselves in the deep silence... and are made alive again...

And when we are formed like this... when being in relationship matters more than being right... when what we do matters more than what we believe... when being vulnerable and open matters more than knowing everything... then what we do will be formed by love... So go... and do likewise...

Mike+